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ABSTRACT

Initiated by the government of the Netherlands and UNESCO, the European Policy Conference on Early Childhood Education focused on early childhood policy issues with special reference to the social integration of children and families at risk. The conference was organized around three themes including quality, accessibility and going-to-scale. This report summarizes highlights from the conference proceedings. Following a foreword and executive summary noting six emerging policy issues in early childhood education, the report presents a summary of proceedings, including: (1) conference organization; (2) pre-conference meeting of experts; (3) keynote speeches; (4) workshops; (5) meeting with participants of Averroes Step programs; and (6) panel of selected guests. The next section of the report contains the following three position papers: (1) "Early Childhood Development: Quality in Policy and Practice" (J. Kloprogge); (2) "Access to Early Childhood Development: Strategies for Enhancing Social Integration" (N. van Oudenhoven & R. Wazir); and (3) "Early Childhood Policy: Implications for Large-Scale Implementation" (B. Bekkers). The final section presents in-depth discussion of the six emerging policy issues noted in the executive summary. A concluding statement and a list of participants are appended. (SD)

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Early Childhood Care and Education as a structural approach to integrating children and families at risk

A challenge for policy making

Report of the European Policy Conference on Early Childhood Education

23 - 24 April 1998

Amsterdam, Netherlands

Edited by John Bennett

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EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION AS A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO INTEGRATING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT RISK: A CHALLENGE FOR POLICY MAKERS

Report
of the European Policy Conference on Early Childhood Education

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The European Policy Conference and the position papers were sponsored by the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

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The authors are responsible for the choice and presentation of the facts contained in this publication and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organisation.

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UNESCO Activities in Early Childhood

Principle for action

Learning begins at birth. *(Article 5 - 1990 Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All)*

Early Childhood Care and Education is an integral part of basic education and represents the first and essential step in achieving the goals of Education-for-All. Recent world conferences testify to a growing appreciation of the crucial importance of the child's earliest years, and of the need to support families and communities in their role as the child's most influential educator. The learning capacity and value orientations of children are largely determined by the time the child reaches the age of formal schooling. For this reason, any sustained effort in Education for All must set targets and programmes for early childhood and attempt to raise the life-skills level of families.

Improving children's health and nutrition is necessary, but increasingly, in a situation where fourteen out of fifteen of the world's children survive until the age of one, governments and civil society are turning their attention to the psycho-social and cognitive development of children. Well conceived quality early childhood programmes help meet the diverse needs of young children during the crucial early years of life, enhance their readiness for schooling, have a positive and permanent influence on later schooling achievement. In addition, countries that succeed in mobilizing local government, municipalities, communities and voluntary organizations in the care and education of young children have been able to decentralise and innovate in their educational systems and, at the same time, make an important contribution toward population information and family education.

UNESCO's Early Childhood and Family Education Unit

The *Early Childhood and Family Education (ECF) Unit* co-ordinates research, activities and initiatives undertaken by UNESCO in early childhood care and education, parent and family education, and early childhood research. It seeks to:

- improve access to early childhood care and education by making such programmes more widely available and accessible, and improving school-readiness;
- support family education and policy formulation by encouraging the participation and promoting the role of families and communities in basic education programmes;
- improve the content of early childhood programmes, in particular their design and quality.
- redirect and strengthen early childhood training programmes;
- strengthen the information base on early childhood by improving the availability and quality of information, research and data on young children and their families;
- promote legislation on behalf of children and families, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child, through awareness raising and advocacy;
- collaborate in artistic, intellectual and cultural events promoting reflection on childhood and family issues.

Early Childhood Interventions

With the help of its specialized services, its roster of consultants, its partnership with sister agencies of the United Nations - in particular UNICEF and WHO - and the co-operation of major institutes and NGOs, UNESCO provides various services to its Member States, UN Agencies, foundations, organizations and individuals working in favour of children and families. Some of its activities include:

- supporting early childhood development/family education programmes in the Middle East, the Pacific, Latin America and South East Asia;
- publishing information and research results on early childhood topics, such as:
  - *Enhancing the Skills of Early Childhood Trainers,* a training pack for the training of trainers produced with the Bernard van Leer Foundation, already published in Arabic, Chinese and English.
  - *Toward a Fair Start for Children: Programming for Early Childhood Care and Developement in the Developing World* by Dr Robert Myers, already published in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Hindi, Indonedian, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, Thai and Vietnamese.

- sponsoring sub-regional training workshops for administrators in policy and organization of informal early childhood development systems in the Pacific, Africa and the Middle East;
- strengthening or establishing regional Early Childhood Co-operating Centres in Europe and Francophone Africa;

Family Education and Early Childhood Development

Systemic early child development programmes are an excellent investment for States, in that they raise significantly the health and educational levels of young children and allow women to enter the labour market. Children, however, always need the security and orientation which the home provides, nor should it be forgotten that societies are founded on the quality of the homes and families of which they are composed. Family education

- provides parents with the necessary knowledge and skills to raise their children successfully;
- builds up self-reliance, networking and social consciousness among parents.

Member States have much to gain from promoting family education. In situations where it is impossible to set up early childhood, centre-based programmes funded by the State, excellent child care and education can be provided through educating parents and supporting their initiatives at community level. UNESCO recommends State support for family education not only as a fruitful investment in children but also as a means of raising the educational level of a country as a whole. In a context dominated by rapid social change and by the expansion of scientific and technological knowledge, parent education is a first step toward supporting community development and education. In the past three years, the Organization has supported over twenty different projects in Member States worldwide focusing on the development and education of families and young children.

Early Childhood Research

UNESCO seeks to encourage the development and promotion of early childhood research by :

- promoting the development of dialogue and partnerships between researchers, early childhood professionals and decision makers.

- ensuring identification and dissemination of best practices in early childhood and family education programming.
- undertaking surveys of on-going research projects concerning early childhood issues.
- assisting those responsible for early childhood programmes in planning appropriate early childhood interventions and in improving the quality of early learning environments.
- providing advice and training on methods for collection, analysis and dissemination of early childhood information.

Early Childhood Information/Documentation Activities

To create opportunities for institutions and individuals to learn about each other's needs and actions, enhance information exchange on early childhood, and build up active relationships to benefit young children and their families, UNESCO:

- serves as a networking centre and clearing house for information on early childhood issues, policies, programmes and organizations, and as the lead agency for the *Inter-Agency Early Childhood Communication Strategy*.
- collects, compiles and disseminates basic information on early childhood care and education systems, organizations and curricula.
- maintains a data bank of early childhood care and education information.
- produces practical directories, publications, briefs and reports on early childhood care and education systems, organizations, curricula or policies.
- participates in interactive early childhood and children's rights activities on Internet, as a member of the *Children's House in Cyberspace* initiative (at http://childhouse.uio.no).
- provides input into, and support for, selected professional journals and reviews, such as the Interagency Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development's *Coordinator's Notebook*.

The UNESCO Averroès Foundation initiative

Since May 1995, UNESCO and the Averroès Foundation have worked closely together in the development of early childhood education. An important aspect of this co-operation has been the role of the Averroès Foundation as an active partner in UNESCO's Co-operating Centres Programme for Early Child Development.

To give impetus to this programme, in early 1997, the Averroès Foundation established, in association with UNESCO, the Averroès European Training Centre for Early Child Development and the Family. The Centre will become a mobilizing force for the young child and the family environment in the European context; to provide technical assistance to selected countries, to convene meetings of practitioners, specialists and policy makers; to engage in intensive training of trainers.

The Averroès European Training Centre offers a range of courses, including an annual two-month course and various short training courses. The two-month course is geared towards programme specialists, policy makers and practitioners working at intermediary levels. Discussion leaders and trainers will be drawn from the international early child development community. Participants will be given ample room for theoretical reflection, sharing of experience, as well as exposure to practice. Topics that are dealt with during the two-month course are:

- parent-child interaction;
- home-visits and group meetings;
- family and parental support;
- home-based programmes;
- children and families from unaccessible groups;
- quality of centres;
- training of paraprofessionals;
- educational materials and children's books;
- visions of childhood;
- policy making in early child development and parent education;
- local integrated policy methods;
- networking;
- fund raising.

Further enquiries

Information on UNESCO's early childhood actions can be consulted on Internet at http://unesco.uneb.edu/educprog/index.html

Information on the Averroès Foundation and the European Training Centre can be consulted on Internet at http://www.averroes.nl .

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Executive Summary

Context

The European Policy Conference on Early Childhood Education took place in Amsterdam, 23-24, 1998. It was one of a series of recent initiatives taken by the Netherlands Government and UNESCO to address young child and family issues within the framework of education and social welfare policy. Chaired by Mr Pär Stenbäck, President of the International Youth Foundation, the Conference was attended by Ms Tineke Netelenbos, Netherlands Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science, representatives and experts from twenty states and international agencies and by significant numbers of senior policy-making officials from the Dutch ministries.

The key speakers, chosen for their policy-making experience or for their research expertise in the field of early childhood, were: Mr André Roberfroid, European Director, UNICEF; Professor Wassilios Fthenakis, Director of the Bavarian Institute of Early Childhood Education and Research; Mr Roel Bekker, Secretary-General of the Netherlands Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport; Dr Noirín Hayes, Head of the Early Childhood Research Unit of the Dublin Institute of Technology. The closing afternoon was marked by the examination and adoption of the *Concluding Statement* (see Annex I) and by a short *Panel of Selected Guests* from the OECD, Council of Europe, UNESCO and the Dutch ministries.

Conference themes

The Conference focussed on early childhood policy issues with special reference to the social integration of children and families at risk. The rapid evolution of European economies and societies has marginalised significant groups of people, particularly from poor and/or minority backgrounds. Many children fail to benefit fully from school and leave it, at a too early stage, with an abiding sense of failure. Sometimes, they are unable to enter the labour market, which today is characterised by rising educational requirements and credentialism. In response, many European countries see the provision of early care and education programmes not only as allowing the access of women to employment but also as an

instrument of social integration and a means of ensuring the successful adaptation of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds to primary schooling. However, policy makers are still confronted by serious challenges with regard to accessibility, quality and large-scale implementation the themes chosen for examination at the Conference.

In Europe, entitlement to a place in a crèche, kindergarten or nursery school begins at a very early age, ranging, according to country and the category of children considered, from six months to five years. However, entitlement does not guarantee take-up, in particular from families who most need services, e.g. single-parent families or minority families in impoverished circumstances, or families that for one reason or another are unaware of their needs or are unable to address them. In some countries also, children with special needs are in practice excluded, as they are not deemed educable within mainstream provision. Governments need to enhance accessibility through various measures: public consensus on social and educational integration; flexible, well-targeted and decentralised programming; bridging strategies toward communities and families at risk; helping the residents of disaffected neighbourhoods toward a consciousness of community and the possibility of local action. What is at stake here is not just access to social services but of supporting people to participate, to take charge of their own lives. Several guiding principles were proposed with regard to the creation of bridging policies to reach effectively groups in need (see *Concluding Statement*, Annex 1).

Policy concerning the quality of early services also gives rise to concern in European countries. In general, there is awareness of good quality and an aspiration toward achieving it. Europe has also avoided the temptation to increase educational inequality either through pricing low-income parents out of early care and education or by engendering a two-tier system in which parents who need most quality can afford only custodial care or informal baby-minding. However, the basic structural and environmental characteristics of the high quality early childhood setting are not always observed. The importance of a challenging environment for children is greatly underestimated by decision makers, even in affluent Western countries (Jo Klopprogge). In addition, the consensus of the Conference was that much greater attention needed to be given in most early childhood systems and programmes to the involvement of parents. Process, too, poses another challenge. Despite the best

intentions of curriculum designers, there are strong tendencies either, on the one hand, toward neglecting structured learning or on the other, toward adopting didactic teaching approaches. Much better training, both pre- and in-service, is needed for early childhood personnel.

The most common example of large-scale implementation is the state-managed, universal system. In the context of social integration, the universal system has certain weaknesses. Educational research in many countries shows that state education tends to reproduce inequality. Strong correlation still exists between socio-economic background and educational success and failure. In short, adequate contextual response is not a forte of state systems. On the other hand, systems are needed. Countries cannot afford early care and education services that are crisis-based or constituted of a fragmented pattern of agencies, programmes, professional philosophies and attitudes (R. Bekker). In the Netherlands, a number of decentralised large-scale initiatives already exist, which effectively maintain on-going communication with the stake-holders and provide structured learning programmes for both children and parents. B. Bekkers in his paper identifies the conditions necessary for the successful organisation of such programmes.

Emerging policy issues

A number of issues with important policy implications emerged during the Conference debates:

1. For a number of reasons, *early childhood care and education has become a priority area in social and educational policy making, in response to multiple societal needs*. However, it is doubtful that all countries have re-conceptualised the early care and education field or established the conditions that would allow early services to respond adequately to complex social and educational needs.

2. *Early development programming as a social and educational service to two generations, not just to young children alone*. In this field, social integration planning toward both parents and children seems to be further advanced than educational planning, which has not yet fully seized the opportunity of investing in the early childhood period as an important component not just in the education of children but also in the lifelong education for parents;

3. *The integration of services in the early childhood care and education field.* Because it has the capacity to respond to multiple social and educational needs, early childhood provision should be a privileged locus of integrated service delivery. However, although very good examples exist in Europe of integrated services, most departments are only in the initial stages of conceptualising and implementing integration;

4. *The involvement of the clients in early care and education, in particular, children with special needs, parents and bridging personnel from target groups.* For one or other reason, all these groups need to be closely involved in early care and education, e.g. children with special education needs have a right to be included not just integrated as a favour in all public programmes, especially in early care and education programmes where their social and educational needs can be met most effectively. Not only is their inclusion at the earliest age vital for early detection but it is also a gage of new standards in education that assure attention to the needs of the individual child;

5. *The challenges posed by decentralisation and diversification of early childhood services.* National State systems have traditionally attempted to guarantee, at least in principle, equality of access and quality. Research is needed on how to decentralise budgets, policy and service delivery so that effective programmes are delivered to low-income families and equity maintained through affirmative action.

6. *The need for a co-ordinating mechanism and an on-going policy agenda or forum for Europe.* European countries have much to learn from each other in the area of early childhood programming. There is also a felt need to align programming approaches and educational levels across Europe so that the mobility of parents with young children can be ensured without their being obliged to undergo disruptive or even traumatic familial transitions. Support both for an annual policy conference and the creation of a new European networking mechanism to promote common early childhood policies across the continent would be a practical and welcome outcome of the Conference.

Looking forward

Mr John Dennehy, Secretary General of the Department of Education, Dublin, representing Mr Michael Martin, the Irish Minister of Education and Science, closed the Conference proceedings with an address outlining the rationale for urgent early education expansion in Ireland. The Irish Ministry of Education and Science will host an early childhood policy meeting in Dublin in the coming year as a follow-up to this Conference.

Summary of proceedings

1. Organisation

The Averroès Foundation, Amsterdam, organised the Conference on behalf of the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, in co-operation with the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and UNESCO. Broad, informal consultations were held with European partners to decide on a theme relevant to as many countries as possible. The theme of early childhood education as a structural approach to social integration was chosen, given the considerable knowledge base already existing in the Netherlands and the real interest in the theme expressed by several European countries.

The Conference was organised to provide a judicious mix of policy statements, expert presentations, and group discussion. Participant discussion was arranged on both days of the Conference through a series of workshops organised around three themes: *quality*, *accessibility* and *going-to-scale*. Position papers were commissioned on the chosen themes, copies of which were addressed to all the participants prior to the Conference.

Highlights of the Conference were the quality of the position papers and keynote presentations, the well-focussed policy discussion groups, the elaboration and adoption of a *Concluding Statement* and a very stimulating exchange with over one hundred mothers of young children who participate in the child/parent *Step* programmes organised throughout the Netherlands by the Averroès Foundation. These programmes, funded by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, were designed, mainly but not exclusively, for ethnic minority children and families. Home-based or focussed on school and parents, they reach each year 30,000 children and families in the Netherlands, mainly from low-income backgrounds. Their objective is to foster the socio-emotional development of young children, to advance cognitive and language skills and to provide educational and social support to parents. The convening of these parents to the Conference was an initiative much appreciated by the policy-makers and experts who had the opportunity to engage in discussion with them.

2. Pre-Conference Meeting of Experts

In preparation for the Conference, an expert meeting was held at the University of Utrecht where a number of acknowledged experts and researchers, presided by Professor Jan Rispens, met for one day to discuss the theme of the Conference and to present the latest research findings on some central themes in early childhood research. The *rapporteur* of the meeting was Dr Noirin Hayes. Short discussion papers were presented on three themes:

- Effectiveness of home-based and centre-based programmes in early childhood education papers by P. Leseman, and J. Rispens.
- Fundamental problems in the programme curriculum papers by T. David, N. Hayes, J. van Kuyk, and A. van der Leif.
- Future role of early childhood education papers by J. Combes, W.E. Fthenakis, and N. van Oudenhoven.

The effectiveness of home-based and centre-based programmes in early childhood education

Research from all over the world shows that such programmes can yield considerable positive effects. Children benefit considerably from quality early childhood education, especially in the domain of language and cognitive development. Programs are especially beneficial for children at risk. There is evidence, however, that results tend to fade away, in particular in those situations when primary education methods neglect the social and cognitive needs of the individual child and focus on conformity to external academic standards. To resolve this difficulty, the Netherlands, had integrated kindergarten and primary education into one school, the *basisschool*, although the question was raised whether the 1985 Education Acts emphasis on creativity, individualised learning, differentiated activities and the socio-emotional development of children was always respected.

Successful programmes are characterised by *sufficient intensity* (that is, four or five half days per week over at least two years); *early timing* (reaching children at the age of three or even younger); *a child-centred pedagogical approach* (the adult taking a nurturing, tutorial approach rather than a didactic teaching role, yet without losing sight of the real

capacity of young children to learn and progress in a structured manner); a good level of *parental or family support*.

An important conclusion was that the socio-emotional development of young children needs far more attention. There is a tendency to focus on the cognitive aspects of programmes, on pre-academic skills and their evaluation. Research suggests, however, that curriculum has a lesser impact on outcomes at this age than the creation of a warm, positive and professional relationship between the teacher and each child. Professionalism in the early childhood setting means the skilful conduct of a relationship toward the child, the staging of developmental inputs at the right moment and the provision of opportunity to the child to learn actively and creatively.

Another important aspect of successful programming is partnership with parents, in particular when it leads to support for children and the further education of parents. Programmes that achieve this aim confirm the exciting dual potential of early childhood programming, reaching not only one but two generations and perhaps, an entire community.

Fundamental problems in the programme curriculum

There is little doubt that a curriculum can guide educational programmes and help educators enormously through describing the format and content of enriched childhood activities. It can also provide a basis for national monitoring by reminding teachers of the potential capacity of children of this particular age group in terms of learning achievement, motor development and social skills. However, the curriculum of the early childhood programme must be sensitive to the needs of the individual child and to particular groups of children. In short, it should allow room for contextual factors and adaptive teacher response. Children come from widely different backgrounds. In addition, they face today multiple transitions in their lives that are potentially distressful, e.g. the stress of moving from their home, neighbourhood and friends because their parents must seek work elsewhere or the emotional turmoil caused by divorce, family breakdown and even violence. The early childhood centre should be a secure and protective environment for them, while the curriculum should have the flexibility to be sensitive to particular needs. To achieve the successful use of a curriculum, ongoing teacher training is essential. If

this aspect is neglected, there is a considerable risk of dissonance between what is intended and actual practice.

Learning achievement and the socio-emotional development of young children is not determined by any one isolated component of the early childhood programme but by the relationships and interactions between different elements. Cognitive and social skills are best elicited through experiences of children during play with each other and through activities in which they are easily engaged, guided by a teacher who is sensitive to the needs of the child. Placing children in groups with each other likewise creates an opportunity for them to experience positive social relations with peers, guided by respectful and accepting adults. The meeting agreed that this is a primary means through which early childhood education contributes to social integration.

The future role of early childhood education

Growing complexity will be perhaps the outstanding characteristic of future early child development programming, which can no longer be limited to traditional care or educational agendas for young children. Originally defined in terms of processes and events relating to children, early development is more and more a human resources and social policy tool and an area for family and community intervention. There is also the complexity of the new human development research, taking for its object the growing plurality of lifestyles and family structures, and the increasing vertical differentiation of European society. The relationship of these changes to the wellbeing of young children will not be simple, especially in a context where parental mobility, family transitions and the employment of women outside the home are on the increase. The early childhood field will also be characterised by complex co-ordinating strategies, e.g. between various government departments; between the formal and informal sectors; between field workers and targeted groups, between applied and basic researchers and policy planners.

3. Keynote speeches

A highlight of the keynote speeches was the correlation of the approaches of the two major ministries present, viz. the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Netherlands Ministry of Health,

Welfare and Sport. In the Netherlands, the organisation of services for young children comes under the responsibility of these two ministries and of various youth services. There is obviously much co-operation taking place between the Ministries for the good of children and families, a fact that is further corroborated by the recent OECD case study on the MOVE programme in Emmen, an educational priority area (OVG) in north-eastern Holland (see Co-ordinating Services for Children and Youth at Risk, OECD, Paris, 1998).

In her welcoming address, **Ms Tineke Netelenbos, Netherlands Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science** expressed the wish that the Conference would provide a significant impulse to international exchange and policy formulation in the field of early childhood education. Targeted attention to young children is a duty in States committed to equality of opportunity for their citizens. Educational research shows that children from stable, educated homes benefit more from equal educational opportunities than disadvantaged children, and that the gap tends to increase ever more rapidly as children mature. The conclusion is that education and care programmes should be put into place at the earliest possible age for young children at risk of school failure, while at the same time offering their parents guidance, education and support. A holistic approach to child and family needs is necessary to overcome educational disadvantage, hence her Ministry continued co-operation with the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport.

Another means of catering effectively for the needs of particular groups has been the Education Ministry's policy of granting school financing on the basis not just of numbers but of the needs of children and parents. The principle of such financing is that increased capitation grants are given to centres catering for children with greater needs, e.g. to children coming from low-income backgrounds; to children from ethnic minority backgrounds combined with low educational achievement of parents; to children with special educational needs or learning disabilities. Exceptionally unequal situations justify positive discrimination.

Still another initiative to reach unreached children has been to decentralise educational responsibility toward the municipalities. The local community is generally in a better position to identify local needs

and resources than the national authorities, hence, the move toward decentralising not only services but also policy and finances. In this context, early childhood education has become an important theme in local policy development, the emphasis being placed on actual accessibility and measures of outcome.

Mr R. Bekker, Secretary-General of the Netherlands Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport addressed the meeting on the following day on the topic of strengthening policy conditions for early childhood development and education. A preliminary step is to see early development as shared by several national policy groups: education, social welfare, health - to name but the most obvious ministries. If early education is looked upon only as a form of assistance to the school system, it is doomed to failure, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The early development of children is an authentic social investment for all sectors in response both to the multiple needs of young children and to the complex and cross-sectoral social changes that are societies are experiencing.

With dramatically falling birth rates, the European states are turning into multi-cultural societies with, at times, widening social divisions. For instance, in the Netherlands second largest city, Rotterdam, more than 50% of the children in primary school have an immigrant background. This entails issues of new social values, of solidarity and cohesion that the school alone cannot solve. In fact, the assumptions on which traditional education systems are built may no longer be valid, as our societies are confronted by the challenges of globalisation, lifelong learning and the information age. In this respect, early start and parent outreach programmes are of vital importance especially in disadvantaged areas for a more responsive, social and flexible education system. In short, concerted action between education, social welfare, the health sector, youth, juvenile justice toward children and families seems unavoidable.

However, the Netherlands cannot be content with co-operation that is crisis-based or constituted of a fragmented pattern of agencies, programmes, professional philosophies and attitudes. Already, much reflection and experimentation in policy has taken place, as in the 1994 Welfare Act. Structural coherence both at central and local levels is a priority, translated into locally-based social policy development and the

generation of integrated community services at local level. Such integrated community services will involve all relevant actors, including the citizens. Effective decentralisation requires a rethinking of the role of central government, the role of different departments and indeed, of the model of governance.

Mr André Roberfroid, Director of UNICEF, Europe, outlined UNICEF's policy for early childhood care for development. UNICEF takes a child-centred approach and hence speaks of care for development. In doing so, it means to underline that whatever service is provided whether it is focussed on social integration, the employment of women, the health or education of children should have as its ultimate aim to contribute to the development of the child. This is a basic principle of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely, that at the heart of policy making, the best interests of the child should be prioritised.

UNICEF works in many countries to promote holistic, integrated approaches to child care with the aim of ensuring the survival, maximal development and protection of the young child through child-friendly, family-focussed and community-based programmes. In this work, the presence of partnerships between government services, local authorities, voluntary organisations, the private sector and community groups is vitally important, for, it is all too obvious that the negative synergies of risk factors, low-birth babies, lack of immunisation, chronic morbidity, teenage pregnancy, family dysfunction and crumbling family structures, lack of work, children rearing children are tragically evident everywhere.

Where progress has been made, there has generally been in place: a legal and regulatory framework in favour of children and families; systematic analysis of the economic, social, cultural and socio-emotional contexts of the children being targeted; the identification and further use of appropriate child-care practices current in the child's family or group; clear definitions of the various roles of the partners involved; clear identification of who is accountable for the different aspects of the child's welfare; community participation in programme design, implementation and evaluation, including information collection and analysis.

Flagship elements of UNICEF child strategy are: to promote responsible parenthood; to ensure the protection and health of infants and

mothers; to mobilise communities in support of young children and their families; and to assist governments in developing national child and family policies.

Professor Wassilios Fthenakis, Director of the Bavarian State Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research addressed the Conference on *The Socialising Role of Early Childhood Development and Education in the 21st Century*. Far-reaching changes are accumulating today in lives of European children, resulting from the profound structural and qualitative changes that have taken place in work, society and the family institution. The age-old disabilities of poverty and social exclusion are still present, but in addition, children increasingly have to cope with divorce, separation, reconstituted families and uprooting from their own neighbourhoods due to pressures on parents to be mobile in their search for work. The environmental, structural or process-related criteria that are used to evaluate quality in early education programmes may no longer be sufficient to take into account the strains that very young children undergo from normative and non-normative biographical events.

Of central importance to social integration in the next century are the following issues a) social integration of children with special needs; b) intercultural education of all young children; c) helping young children to cope with transitions. We are far from going-to-scale in any of these fields. For children with special needs, policies of normalisation and inclusion need to be put into place as recommended by the 1994 Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, Paris, 1994). An obvious place to start is in early childhood centres and schools, where children with special needs should be included, not just integrated, into all classes. This implies adequate training for child professionals and the reintegration of budgets and personnel (away from specialised sub-systems) so as to resource adequately schools and families. It also implies radical improvements in early diagnosis and the reinforcement of co-operation between early childhood institutions and professional therapeutic and counselling services.

Because of successive migrations within and into Europe, the provision of a multi-cultural dimension in education has become a necessity. This does not mean the imposition on children of a new, exclusive European identity based on a supposed common cultural

heritage. Rather, intercultural education will be future-oriented, multicultural and based on democratic rights and equality of participation. It will renounce the prevailing monolingual perspective on integration and make the existence and appreciation of different languages in a group of children transparent for both children and educators. The aims of such education would be: cultural open-mindedness, competence in dealing with foreign cultures, the command of several languages, an international even global perspective, education in human rights, peace and democracy. Such a development is not opposed to strong cultural identities at national or more local levels.

Coping adequately with transitions and discontinuities must also become a feature of early education. It is known that rather negative outcomes result for young children when unsuccessful normative transitions from home to kindergarten and from kindergarten to school are made. A fortiori, non-normative transitions, e.g. losing a parent through divorce, becoming a one-parent family or transferring to a new language or cultural environment, can be difficult and painful experiences for children. Early childhood educators need training to support children in coping with transitions in their individual or family context and in education. Resilience research has substantially contributed to identifying coping strategies. Lest one imagine that such attention to coping is unimportant, the most recent major longitudinal study on young children, the American NICHD study (Clarke-Stewart, 1997), shows that attention to contextual factors by early educators greatly improves outcomes for young children.

Professor Noirín Hayes, Head of Early Education Research at the Dublin Institute of Technology, conveyed to the Conference the gist and feeling of the Pre-Conference Meeting of Experts. The experts had presented as objectively as possible the evidence that supports investment in early education. They pointed out that the empirical evidence for blanket investment does not exist, but supports only the usefulness of creating high-quality programmes. Such initiatives can have very positive effects on young children and, *inter alia*, yield both economic and social benefits. No single model emerged as a panacea but rather a combination of programming strategies to meet the complexity of life for young children in contemporary society, including the dangers of traditionally taboo subjects, such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, neglectful families. In this respect, early intervention will, in the future, play a key

role, in particular if it can take a two-generation approach to education and care. In conclusion, Dr Hayes underlined that much more research is needed on parental expectations of early education and on the link between early childhood and the primary school - in particular, on the capacity of traditional primary schools to build on what is best in early childhood education. Regular monitoring of systems, accompanied by well-designed action research, is more than ever necessary to generate reliable information on which policy makers can base decisions. In fact, a recurrent challenge in European countries is to communicate to each other the results of our national research and then to turn our knowledge into appropriate policies and quality provision.

4. Workshops

The workshops on quality, access and going-to-scale were a highly successful feature of the Conference. Substantive position papers on the themes *quality*, *access* and *going-to-scale* - had been prepared by **Jo Kloprogge** Director of Sardes Educational Services, **Rekha Wazir** and **Nico van Oudenhoven** of the International Child Development Initiatives and **Boudewijn Bekkers**, Programme Director of the Averroès Foundation. The authors acted as resource persons during the workshops, while presiding and reporting roles were ensured by: **Bjørn Bredesen**, Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, Norway; **Gerard van Rienen**, Netherlands Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport; **Mark Frequin**, Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; **John Bennett**, Former Director of Early Childhood Education at UNESCO; **Teresa Vasconcelos**, Director of Basic Education, Ministry of Education, Portugal; **Nico van Oudenhoven** of International Child Development Initiatives. Owing to the presence of many personnel from the Netherlands ministries, who are actively engaged in policy making, a real focus and high standard of debate was maintained. As the substantive results of the workshop discussions are contained in the *Concluding Statement* in Annex 1, we shall briefly summarise below the main topics addressed in the position papers.

Quality:

At the end of his paper on *Early Childhood Development: quality in policy and practice*, **Jo Kloprogge** quotes Robert Myers conclusion to *The*

Twelve Who Survive (Routledge 1993) in which he states that the moral, social, economic, political and programmatic reasons for investing in early development are compelling. Need and demand have grown, our knowledge and experiential base for action is sound, examples of how to foster early development abound and cost is not the main deterrent to expanded programming. A major challenge remains however: how to maintain high quality in early childhood programmes on a large scale. It is helpful to approach this challenge at three different levels: that of the child; that of programmes and provision; that of policy making at central and local levels.

Quality maintenance at the level of the child is measured by the quality of interaction with peers and adults; by the quality of the environment (a challenging environment for children is greatly underestimated, even in affluent Western countries) and by the scope given to children to participate actively in their development. At the level of programmes and provision, quality indicators may be summarised as: clear and specific goals; adequate internal design of the programme; educators trained and able to ensure specific child-centred tasks; early beginning of programmes with adequate intensity and frequency; satisfactory group composition and staff ratios; external conditions for successful implementation of the programme, including the active participation of parents. It is not easy, however, to harmonise programmes and provision to suit parental expectations as such a wide variety of child-rearing practices (including neglect) exist. The difficulties of mobilising parents is also well-known: hence, policies at strengthening institutional programmes or encouraging innovative approaches are preferred by policy makers to home-based programmes designed to help parents in educating their children.

In attempting to maintain quality in policy making at central and local levels, it is well to distinguish between tasks that are best performed at each level. Central government can best ensure funding, training and certification, promotion of experimental programmes, system monitoring and research. Decentralised authorities seem to manage more effectively: analysis of the local situation, instrument analysis (that is, identification of the best means of ensuring effective provision through using the opportunities offered by national policy and potential local strengths);

setting of local priorities; formulating goals and taking measures to achieve these goals; setting up systems of evaluation and quality control.

Monitoring the quality of early childhood programmes should ideally be undertaken on the basis of formal criteria, e.g. the number of children participating and their social background; the qualification of staff and teachers; the goals and the curriculum; the quality of the building and material equipment; the parents' view of quality offered; the outcomes for the children. However, agreements need to be reached with policy makers and institutions about the types of information needed and issues such as: who compiles the information and how it is collected and processed. An important aspect is to transfer in a sensitive way monitoring results to policy makers, schools and agencies so that they can respond better to children's needs.

An interesting model for self-evaluation for early childhood institutions is the Effective Early Learning Research Project (EELRP) model, designed by the Worcester College of Higher Education, using ten dimensions of quality. Based on the data collected and the additional use of the Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children and the Adult Style Observation for Early Childhood Education, a case study of the quality of early learning is made. Following this, an action plan for staff is jointly set up by the personnel and the researcher. In the third stage, this action plan is implemented and finally, the whole group engage in reflection and further analysis of the process.

Accessibility

In their paper, *Access to Early Childhood Development: Strategies for Enhancing Social Integration*, **Rekha Wazir** and **Nico van Oudenhoven** show first of all why early childhood development programming is a useful tool for social integration. However, despite the integrative character of such programming, participation in early services (day care, after-school care, nursery schools, play groups and formal education and care services) may be weak for certain groups. Strategies for improving their access are generally centred on: clients, programmes, policies or organisation.

Empowering potential users is an essential step in any client-centred strategy. To achieve this goal, families and not individual children are seen as the units of intervention. Recognising the child-rearing skills of excluded families and validating other forms of local knowledge is a first step in increasing self-confidence and thus removing an important barrier to social integration.

The two main planks of programmatic strategies are: building on local community strengths and taking account of the intersecting needs of both parents and children. Being responsive to grass roots needs means involving as many key local players as possible: parents, community stakeholders, informal networks and helping them to interact effectively with larger services and intervention systems. Parental involvement is always necessary, but especially with socially excluded groups that are likely to suffer from multiple disadvantages.

Policy-centred strategies should normally set a clear and inspiring agenda and decentralise responsibilities and resources to local levels. Organisational strategies would include capacity building of agencies (including NGOs) and the integration of services. The multi-faceted nature of problems facing marginalised families requires a co-ordinated response from agencies. Excessive fragmentation leads not only to duplication of efforts and resources but inevitably to unequal access.

Going-to-scale

Boudewijn Bekkers begins his paper with some observations on globalisation and the information age. According to the OESO report on *Sustainable flexibility: a prospective study on work, family, society in the information age*, (OECD, Paris, 1997) the advent of this age will require workforce re-organisation, flexibility and ever-higher education standards. There will be more stress, more short-term unemployment, more job changing, more insecurity. All workers, including unskilled workers, will be required to work at higher levels of social and emotional capacity.

Because of two parents working and their need to be mobile in their pursuit of work opportunities, certain necessary points of contact, e.g. kindergartens, schools and neighbourhood centres, will become the

essential, social integration agencies for the mobile families of the future. They will replace the traditional, close-knit neighbourhood as the stable integrating factor in the lives of parents and children. This does not mean that the present educational functions of the kindergarten or school will be lost. Rather, they will continue to be seen and valued as educational centres, as providing children with a good start in the lifelong learning cycle. Hence, early development and education programmes will be offered on an even wider scale, with particular focus on and programming for disadvantaged children and their parents. Less emphasis will be put on traditional academic skills but on problem solving; self- and group-organisation; social and communication skills; the development of networking. However, if the school is to assume a larger role in the life of children and parents, it should become a community school in which educational processes occurring in the family and community or society can be integrated with those happening in the school.

Because of the overwhelming information flow brought by information technology, societies will become more and more centred on learning rather than on work as it is commonly understood today. In parallel to the family as a fundamental learning environment, the workplace will become a learning organisation. Even more than in the past, education will be of paramount importance in defining one's position in society. Social disadvantage will therefore be concentrated more and more in the most lowly educated groups. In this context, it is important that early development and education programmes should prepare children for the information age and become a central instrument of social policy.

For large-scale implementation of early childhood education programmes, the following elements are needed:

- *A good program*: A good programme is one based on best practice in the early childhood education field, including a curriculum in which room exists for both teachers and children;
- *Experimentation*: Experimentation requires that before starting large-scale implementation, the programmes, methods etc. need to be tried out in different locations and circumstances.
- *Stable funding*: In large-scale implementation, it is important to know the likely costs and the existing or probable new funding resources available both from central or decentralised budgets. Budgets for

education, social policy, policy for disadvantaged children, labour market policy etc. can be tapped in principle. Since many policy fields can be involved, it may be well to establish a policy group from different Ministries.

- *Government support*: Effective early childhood education is rooted in the community and supported by centralised policy. The challenge is to strike the right balance between local initiatives and national concerns. For large-scale implementation, it is necessary to have support from local or central government to ensure stable funding, to professionalise, to set regulations, to co-operate within a broader policy context, e.g. in the fields of education, health, sports, or welfare.
- *Contact with local groups*. Large-scale implementation in early childhood education effectively at local level requires contact with local groups of professionals in education, care and health, with local committees for disadvantaged groups, with local politicians and above all, direct contact with parents.
- *Target group participation*: For successful implementation on a large scale, many people from the target groups need to be involved on a regular and ongoing basis if the target groups are to be effectively reached.

With regard to the question of quality in large-scale implementation, the Dutch experience of early development programming for disadvantaged groups provides the following pre-conditions for quality: initial training and in-service training; professional exchange; monitoring as a service; client oriented development of materials; ongoing research on programming; flexibility and clear policy. It is interesting to notice how these conditions complement the internal quality criteria (the structural, environmental and process characteristics of the high-quality early childhood programme) mentioned by Jo Kloprogge. Here, we are in the presence of managerial guidelines to enable the delivery on a large scale of such programmes, while reinforcing the take-up of the target population and improving the performance of the service providers.

5. Meeting with the mothers and paraprofessionals engaged in Averroès *Step* programmes

A remarkable event at the Conference was the meeting with mothers and neighbourhood mothers involved in the *Step* programmes run by the Averroès Foundation. Originally, seventy mothers had been invited to share this lunchtime meeting but over one hundred mothers from several ethnic origins - came from different parts of the Netherlands. The proceedings were very well organised, the Conference participants and mothers sharing a light lunch, seated at round tables that allowed for excellent communication. It was a most productive meeting for policy-makers and researchers, allowing them to hear and question at first hand the clients and front-line workers of young child and parent education programmes in the Netherlands. After the meeting, the mothers and paraprofessionals worked together to produce the following conclusions and recommendations. An interesting feature of the statement is the perspective adopted by the mothers carrying out the programme who obviously want to move beyond the status of paraprofessionals a success story in itself!

Recommendations

- *Owing to the increasing diversity of the target group in the Netherlands (wider ethnic diversity, more complex cultural, social and employment challenges), greater attention should be given to measuring the efficacy of programmes;*
- *Extra support should be provided for work with multi-problem families, through increasing the number of neighbourhood mothers (paraprofessionals) or through the provision of special assistance and care by welfare organisations in the area;*
- *Co-operation and fine-tuning between different agencies within the neighbourhoods should be promoted. It is essential that these agencies be well informed about the possibilities as well as the limits of early child development programmes. Primary schools in particular should be aware of this, including schools that have few pupils from ethnic minority families;*
- *It is recommended that early development and education programmes should receive structured and regular funding. There should also be an*

inquiry into the possibilities of contributions by parents. Early investment in parents of young children is of the utmost importance as this has a major influence on the children;

- *Early development and education programmes should be a basic service accessible for everyone. There should be no more waiting lists or forced selection of target groups for projects. Restricting programmes to disadvantaged and/or ethnic groups has a stigmatising effect;*
- *More programmes and activities should be developed as a follow up to the Step programmes. The intermediary function of these programmes, bridging the gap between professional services and minority ethnic neighbourhoods and homes, should be enhanced;*
- *The possibility to carry out programmes in the language used by the family should be preserved. If non-Dutch speaking parents are required in turn to carry out the home programme in the Dutch language, explicit language support should be provided;*
- *More attention should be paid to the role of mothers, but all parents, regardless of their background, express a strong need for support;*
- *Mutual exchange of information between mothers on the one hand and policy makers and professionals on the other hand is necessary. Policy makers and professionals should take the initiative to ensure this exchange;*
- *Neighbourhood mothers (paraprofessionals) play a key-role in the programmes. They deserve higher wages for their work. Inequalities in wages between paraprofessionals, as is now the case owing to the influence of employment schemes, should be avoided;*
- *Neighbourhood mothers should be offered more facilities for certified training;*
- *The insecure professional status of the neighbourhood paraprofessional should be improved. After working in a programme for several years, they should not run the risk of being fired simply to make way for someone new;*
- *Separate meetings should be organised for mothers in which they are in charge, and not only meetings with policy makers and professionals;*

6. Panel of Selected Guests

The Forum of Selected Guests was presided by Mr Pär Stenbäck, President of the International Youth Foundation, and composed of Mr Abrar Hasan, Head of Education Division, OECD; Mr Thomas Kattau, Directorate for Social and Economic Affairs, Mr John Bennett, Former Director of Early Childhood Programmes representing Mr Colin Power, Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO; Mr Thijs Malmberg, Director Social Policy, Netherlands Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and Mr Mark Frequin, Director Primary Education, Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

The agency members congratulated warmly the Government of the Netherlands for an excellent initiative and for its unfailing support to early development and education over recent years. The Conference was very useful for a number of reasons:

- The reinforcement of vertical links and co-operation across Dutch ministries, many of which were represented on one or both days of the Conference and in parallel, the forging of stronger links between the various international agencies around the theme of early childhood development and education. The fact that this international policy consultation will be continued by the Irish Government is a further source of satisfaction;
- The recognition that early childhood policy is moving at the moment from employment-driven concerns into the areas of social welfare and educational policy. These areas are becoming ever more closely linked, as education in particular within early childhood programming and the community school concept is now recognised as a major instrument toward social integration. However, early childhood care and education is not in itself a panacea, but a part only of social welfare and education policy. Schools too have great importance and needs and they are more directly connected with employment and the labour market. Yet, owing to the nature of the problems families and children are facing today, the early childhood area is central and requires real co-operation between the on-line ministries.
- The realisation that the new information age will require increased knowledge and social skills and impose new modes of work and social organisation. In this context, education will become truly life-

long and its schools will evolve toward lifelong, communal education centres (the community school) where parents obliged to live more anonymous, mobile and self-directed life-styles can resource themselves;

- The recognition too that much better policy formulation, decentralisation and implementation is needed. The lack of real access for various social groups and the mediocre or untested quality of many programmes demonstrate that there is a wide gap between the policy aspirations of central government and what actually takes place on the ground. Policy formulation and co-ordination at and between central and local levels must improve as, for a host of reasons - including the basic demographic facts of the European Union - education and social cohesion will remain central challenges in the coming years;

- The repeated call that the needs of children should remain central in policy making. Without underestimating their innate capacity either to adapt or learn, we should observe and listen to children, fund research on their welfare and review continually our conceptions of childhood. To date, too many policies do not take children into account at all and frequently, policies for children have been driven not by their best interests but by adult concerns.

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Early childhood development, quality in policy and practice

Jo Kloprogge, director of Sardes Educational Services.

1. Introduction

Interest in early childhood development has dramatically increased in the past years. Researchers, practitioners and politicians seem to have become convinced that the education and the development of young children deserves study and investments in good practice. This growing interest in early child development has certainly been stimulated by international organisations traditionally interested in education, such as the Council of Europe, but the OECD, the IMF and other institutions concerned with economic development also seem to be increasingly aware of the importance of early child development.

There are several reasons why interest in early child development has increased. Research findings of the last decades provide a wealth of evidence of the importance of the early years for children's development. Infancy research is often referred to as one of the most dynamic areas of research. Each year new findings are published, showing that children have a greater capacity of performing cognitive and linguistic operations, building concepts and constructing symbolic representations and abstractions than has hitherto been assumed. Perhaps even more influential have been some childhood intervention programmes. It will be difficult to name any single programme that has had as much impact on educational practice and policy making as the High Scope pre-school programme based in Ypsilanti. However, in more general terms, too, childhood intervention programmes often seem to produce convincing results and this often inspires further initiatives. Evidence from both research and good practice, then, may well have helped to put early child development higher on the political agenda. However, one may question if this evidence in itself would have been sufficient to convince policy makers. In my view, two developments in political thinking have brought early child development to the attention of politicians and policy makers. Firstly, it has become clear how much the social and economic development of countries depends on qualities of its population. For a country to function adequately in a global environment, it is necessary that good quality education is provided for the whole population. Relying

upon a relatively small elite of highly educated professionals does not guarantee a balanced development of society as a whole. Secondly, in many countries policy makers are facing problems that be traced more or less directly to the development and education of children at an early age. One may think here of the growing incidence of delinquent behaviour, dropping out of school, illiteracy, behaviour problems and the lack of social ties between young people and the wider society and its institutions. Because politicians and policy makers at national and local levels are having to cope with such problems, they have become more willing to invest in the development of young children.

So basically there seems to be a bright future for early childhood development programmes. Nevertheless, one may justifiably raise the question whether it is realistic to expect long-term investments in the development of young children. The interest of policy makers in the subject may easily make way for other priorities if success does not show at a relative short term. If we do not manage to develop and implement good quality practices and programmes on a large scale, the interest in long-term approaches may gradually give way to a preference for approaches that produce more immediate - but partial - results and that are therefore easier to handle in politics.

2. Current problems in policy and practice

In a paper about quality that is directed at policy makers one should perhaps not elaborate too much on the problematic sides of the subject. Problems are there to be solved, but if one places too much emphasis on them, one runs the risk of reducing the enthusiasm and the confidence that are needed to design bold policies. And bold policies are exactly what is needed with regard to the education and development of young children. Yet, I think one should be aware of the pitfalls that may be encountered in designing policies in this area. In this paragraph a number of possible problems are described. This overview is not comprehensive and some of the problems may be limited to some countries, whereas others are more general. Situations may differ between countries and even within a country there may be differences between regions or municipalities.

1. Insufficient awareness of the importance of early child development

   Even though, as stated earlier, awareness of the importance of early child development has grown steadily in the past years, there is still a long way to go in this respect. In my own work I have found that many politicians, certainly those working at local levels, react surprised to statements about the importance of the early years for the development of children. Some barely disguise their disbelief and ask whether you are joking, others are interested but not instantly convinced. Parents often react in a similar vein. There is a widely held belief that children in the first years of their lives should be allowed to grow up in a protective environment, to have fun and to play and that the introduction to real life can be held off without much risk for their development.

2. Conflicting ideas among professionals

   Although many professionals and volunteers who work with young children are aware of the need to stimulate the development of young children, there is also a large number who are not convinced or even strongly opposed against such stimulation. The problem is that both may be right, depending on the characteristics of the children. Children who grow up under favourable circumstances, for instance children of highly educated parents who spend a lot of time on their child's education, may receive sufficient encouragement at home and, in consequence, may have little need for stimulation from pre-school provisions or programmes. Children who grow up under less favourable circumstances, may be deprived of developing their full potential due to a lack of encouragement. Research findings in the Netherlands suggest that stimulation at home and participation in pre-school provisions correlates positively with higher school performance, especially in language proficiency. These effects are not limited to specific SES groups or gender.

3. Gaps in knowledge about the development of young children

   Despite progress in research, much is still unknown about the development of young children and about the potential effects of pre-school and early school programmes. Researchers seem to agree that longitudinal research, which involves following cohorts of children, may help to find answers to some pressing questions. The potential impact of longitudinal research has been shown by longitudinal study

of the High Scope project (Berrueta-Clement et al. *Changed lives, the effects of the Perry Preschool Program on youths through age 19*, Ypsilanti, Michigan, 1984), which had a positive effect on policy making with regard to young children in many countries, even though the design of the study has been criticised.

Other often suggested subjects of research include:

- factors influencing learning abilities, e.g. brain processes, nutrition, multimedia technology
- the influence of families, communities, peers and the cultural environment
- variations in policies and programmes and their effects on children's development
- development of systems to monitor the quality of provisions for young children, as well as changes in these provisions.

4. Schooling of volunteers and professionals working with young children

Caring for and working with young children does not have high status in most countries. As a result, people working with young children are generally not well paid (a considerable part of the work is done by volunteers), the requirements for professional training are modest and little is done with regard to inservice training. This situation is better suited to a policy framework whose goals are limited to looking after children, than to a policy framework that considers actively stimulating the development of young children the main goal. The result is that all over the world the highest paid and best trained professionals work with talented young people in universities, whereas the lowest paid and least trained staff work with young children, including those who grow up under adverse conditions. One may well question the acceptability of this situation, both from the perspective of equality of opportunities and from the perspective of costs and benefits at the national level. No matter how one looks at this situation, one thing is certain: it is not easy to change.

The problems described above can make politicians and policy makers cautious about investing substantially in early childhood education; they might even consider it a risk to advocate high political priority for provisions and programmes for young children. They would

probably be less reluctant if they had more certainty as to the quality of the programmes and the benefits of the investments. In other words, it seems reasonable to assume that policy makers are more inclined to support the implementation of provisions and programmes for young children on a large scale, if the quality of the implementation is more or less guaranteed and if the results are visible. The quality of early child development provisions and the possibilities to monitor this quality will be the subject of the remaining part of this paper.

3. The quality of early child development policies

Whether something is of good quality is often difficult to say. Quality is often regarded as an absolute property and, indeed, under some circumstances this can be a good approach. For example, it may well be possible to evaluate a computer or a watch and make a fairly absolute statement about its quality. When discussing the quality of early child development policies, one must look at quality as something of a much more relative nature. Early child development policies that can be qualified as good in one country may be qualified as inadequate in another. What is considered good quality today, may be seen as poor quality ten years from now. And in a time of rapid social and economic change, who can justifiably claim to have found the only right way to prepare children for their future? So the observations about quality presented in this paper are not intended as indications for absolute standards or criteria. They offer some insight into quality factors related to early child development and hopefully they will inspire the discussion about quality. Some of the observations show that several quality aspects must be taken very seriously by those who wish to design policies for early child development. Because even when we view quality as a relative concept, this does not mean that quality can be achieved without taking account of some basic conditions.

The debate about quality and early child development seems to focus on the level of the immediate environment of children. The majority of research and evaluation studies are concerned with the child's immediate environment and of course it is true that this is the level that ultimately matters. However, in order to achieve quality at this level, it must also be reached at levels more distant from the child. The quality of policies and actions at the local or national level determines to a large extent the quality of the provisions that are available to children. Let us take a look at a number factors that are relevant at various levels.

Factors at the level of the child

The development and education of children is mainly determined by:

- interaction with adults and peers
- the physical environment
- the scope children have to participate actively in their own development (see also Early Childhood matters, van Leer, 1998)

Children interact with and learn from adults. Many books have been written about the quality of child-adult interaction and most early childhood programmes are based on more or less specific views on this interaction. Reuven Feuerstein developed a mediation theory using 14 criteria for the interaction between child and adult. In this theory the adult is seen as the mediator between the child and the world. Based on this theory, a training has been developed by Lebeer and Ruyters (SMILE, Sardes 1996) to improve the quality of the interaction between teachers/parents and children. Most early child development programmes use less explicit theories, but refer to the work of developmental psychologists and try to find ways to put research findings or analyses into practice. Most programmes also include strategies directed at the interaction between children, but these strategies are less firmly grounded on scientific ideas. Peer group influences and the interaction between children are areas where research is still relatively scarce.

The physical environment is important for the development of children, because it gives them the opportunity to explore objects, to experiment and to develop their creativity. The importance of a challenging environment for children is greatly underestimated by decision makers, even in the affluent Western countries. And yet at little cost much can be done to improve children's environment in this respect. Even though the work on cultural capital by scholars like Bourdieu provides many arguments to pay more attention to the physical environment of children, this does not seem to have had much impact on the policy level. Parents seem intuitively more inclined to create a challenging environment for their children than those who decide on the budgets for pre-school provisions and primary classrooms.

A recent statement by Judith Evans (Early Childhood Matters, Bernard van Leer Foundation bulletin, February 1998) is highly relevant in this context: Learning and related development involves the child's

construction of knowledge, not an adult imposition of information. The children who are born today grow up in a society that requires them to be independent, to make their own choices, to be able to find and process information and to be resourceful if they wish to fulfil their ambitions. That is why programmes for young children should also give children the opportunity to develop the attitudes and skills of independent learners.

The quality of programmes and provisions

Factors determining the quality of programmes and provisions for young children have been elaborated in some detail. Recent literature shows considerable agreement on these criteria. Although views may differ as to the accents placed in a programme or the required extent of structuring, there is a surprising degree of consensus about the basic ingredients of good programmes. The development of children includes cognitive, social, physical and emotional aspects. Any attempt to stimulate children's development will have to take account of the interdependency of these aspects. Many programmes aim to prepare young children for school and set specific goals. The most important characteristics such programmes should meet are listed below (based on van Tilborg, 1998).

A. Goals

Programmes and provisions for young children should pursue clear and specific goals. Goals that are important with regard to preparing children for school are:

- cognition: development of concepts (Sternberg and Gardner have elaborated the concept of cognition in detail)
- language: vocabulary, the structure of language, communicative skills (including, for immigrant children, second-language acquisition)
- planning, reflection, perseverance, enthusiasm and self-confidence
- thinking skills

B. Design

- a systematic design, including well-defined goals, detailed planning and monitoring of children's progress
- a flexible curriculum, adapted to individual needs; programmes and provisions for children at risk should be closed, rather than open

- opportunities for children to do things, to explore, to learn actively and to participate in meaningful discussions
- adaptation to the cultural background of the children and their families

C. Tasks of teachers/staff

- helping children to perform complex tasks
- respecting the initiative of children
- helping children to develop social competence
- providing emotional support
- offering relevant culture-bound tasks
- promoting active exploration and higher level interactions
- offering structure and setting boundaries
- following an egalitarian pedagogical approach
- observing and testing children's development and progress on a regular basis
- watching over the time spent at playing, learning and instructing
- managing activities for small and large groups

D. Start and frequency

- programmes and provisions should start at an early age, about 12-18 months before primary school entry
- sessions should take place at least 4 mornings or afternoons per week

E. Group composition

- the staff-child ratio should not exceed 1:8
- care should be taken to ensure maximum stability of the groups
- special efforts should be made to increase the participation of children from at risk groups

F. Conditions for successful implementation

- active participation of the parents
- stability of the institution (not too many changes in staff, regular contacts with parents)
- adequate schooling and inservice training of staff
- facilities for multi-lingual activities
- co-operation with primary schools
- co-operation with local networks

These quality criteria seem to be more or less accepted nowadays. The most challenging part is probably the combination of structure and flexibility in the programmes. The optimum balance between these two seemingly opposite characteristics may vary according to the backgrounds of children. Programmes and provisions for a middle class population are often more open and flexible, whereas programmes and provisions for low SES groups tend to be more structured and less flexible.

An issue that will have to be addressed by all programmes and provisions for young children is the relation with the parents. There is no question that parents should be informed, involved and - where necessary - supported in order to enhance the impact of activities. However, it seems increasingly difficult to harmonise activities in programmes and provisions with the educational patterns in the family. One reason for this is the wide variety in child-rearing practices in families. Where some children receive little care at home, are poorly fed and given little encouragement, others are very well cared for and given ample opportunities and facilities to develop their potential. Another reason is the increasing cultural diversity in education, resulting from the growing diversity of the populations in most western countries. Parents' views about education may differ widely, depending on their cultural background, religion, and status in society. In many countries programmes have been developed to support parents in educating their children. Some of these programmes seem rather successful, but many seem to have a limited impact. Policy makers are reluctant to interfere in children's education at home. The domain and the autonomy of the family are considered sacrosanct and government interference seems acceptable only if a child is really in danger. Recently politicians in some countries have begun to consider policies to hold parents more responsible for the education of their children and to hold them accountable for problems arising from a failing education. This debate has not yet been concluded, but it might well result in changes in attitudes towards parents and in the nature of activities for parents. At the current stage of the debate, policies aimed at strengthening institutions (centre-based approaches) and for the implementation of innovative programmes seem to be considered a more viable option for policy makers than policies designed to support parents in educating their children (home-based approaches) or policies involving interference with family life.

Programs may be very well organised within the context of a neighbourhood approach, if there is a basic educational infrastructure in the neighbourhood. In the city of Utrecht e.g. neighbourhood units, consisting of welfare organisations and schools, have been established for some years. Most specific programs for children younger than 12 years are introduced and handled by these units.

Quality in policy making at local and national levels

The education of young children and the need to stimulate their development cannot be ignored by policy makers. There is abundant evidence showing the importance of the infant years for children's cognitive and social development. For societies that are dependent on knowledge and technology and that need to commit individuals to the basic norms and values of the wider society in order to maintain a social balance it is almost imperative to design policies to guarantee - as much as possible - the healthy development of all young children. In most European counties there seems to be consensus on this issue, although regrettably this consensus is not always translated into action. It is, however, evident that the potential of early child development is largely dependent on local and national policies. I shall now try to give some indications as to how local and national policy makers may contribute to good quality provisions and programmes for young children.

A. The local level

Because European countries differ considerably with regard to centralised and decentralised policy making, it is not possible to make a general distinction between responsibilities at local and national levels. However, when analysing the essential contributions of policies to the quality of early child development, one can distinguish between tasks that are best performed at the local level and those that should be carried out at the national level. At the local level we distinguish five steps in the development of local policies of good quality:

- *analyses of the local situation* - At the level of a municipality or neighbourhood information about demographic variables should be available in order to be able to match the demand and supply of provisions for young children. A inner-city neighbourhood with 60%

ethnic minority families will need different arrangements than a small rural municipality with many middle class commuters.

- *trend analyses* - Policy makers at the local level should analyse what instruments they can use to organise high quality provisions for young children. To this end, they should gather information about opportunities offered by national policies and about existing experiences with early childhood programmes and experiments and their suitability for the local context.
- *analysing the combined outcomes of the local and trend analyses* - This analysis should provide insight into gaps in local provision as well as indications for priorities in local policy making.
- *formulating goals* - On the basis of the outcomes of the first three steps it should be possible to define policy goals for the next years, for example: expanding existing provisions, promoting the participation of children from at risk groups, monitoring and improving the quality of existing provisions, participating in new experiments, improving communication with parents, extending inservice training provision, combining centre-based and home-based approaches, setting up co-operation between pre-school provisions and primary schools, improving buildings and equipment.
- *taking measures to achieve these goals* - Such measures may involve: co-ordinating the efforts of institutions providing services for young children and their parents, developing organisational structures (e.g. neighbourhood networks) and procedures, setting up information systems, keeping early child development on the political agenda, providing finances in addition to national budgets.
- *monitoring and evaluation* - Setting up systems for information about the reach and quality of provisions and programmes which enables policy makers to see whether the goals are adequate, activities are well executed, new developments or problems need attention, parents and children are reached, revision of policies is necessary.

Perhaps most important is that policy makers at a local level develop a vision of the way early child development in their community or municipality should be addressed. In mission statements at the local level the social integration of children often takes a central place. Such mission statements can be translated into more concrete policies, where the local government can play a stimulating and co-ordinating role.

B. The national level

Whereas local policy makers can concentrate on rather detailed policy measures, adjusted to the local situation and the needs of the population, at the national level more general conditions need to be created for the realisation of good quality programmes and provisions for young children. Policies at the national level should address the following issues:

- *funding early child development* - I have argued that initiatives aimed at fostering early child development are important for a country as a whole and should in principle cover the whole infant population. In order to avoid big differences between regions or municipalities, central government should develop a national funding system for early childhood provisions and programmes. On the basis of the local situation, local governments can then decide how to spend funds from national budgets and add funds from local budgets if they so wish. The task of the national government is provide the basic conditions that allow the nation-wide development of local policies and that enable local authorities to make more specific choices. By setting specific conditions for local governments applying for national funding, e.g. with regard to the age of children that are allowed to participate in a particular type of provision, a national structure for early child development can be created.
- *adequate training for staff working with young children* - In several countries there is a need to professionalise staff and teachers working with young children. Providing good training facilities is a national concern and is therefore a responsibility of national policy makers. Improving training provision will probably have consequences for the salaries of staff working with young children. However, if we take early child development as seriously as we should, if we agree that it is really important for the future of our societies, we should be prepared to invest in the professional quality of those working with our children.
- *continuation of experimental programmes* - In several countries interesting and successful programmes for young children have been developed and tested. Some of these programmes are currently implemented on a wider scale or have influenced practice in regular provisions for young children. In order to ensure quality over a long period, the development of experimental programmes should be continued. Whether these are based on new insights from research or on new experiences in practice is beside the point here; what is

important is that there is a continuous effort to improve ways to foster the early development of children. Both centre-based and home-based programmes should be developed and tried out. The design, financing and staffing of experimental programmes often goes beyond the scope of local policy making, though this may not be true for all European countries. Generally speaking, this should be seen as the responsibility of policy making at a national level.

- *promoting research into the development of young children* - In Europe educational research seems to have lost some of its attractiveness to policy makers. Although policy makers seem to be interested in evaluations, they often leave other types of research to universities or funding organisations. However, research into the development of young children has yielded so many new insights and ideas in the past decades, that it seems reasonable to say that promoting further research activities should be part of the agenda of policy makers. Research is necessary, both as a source of inspiration for further quality improvement and as a means of testing the quality of existing programmes and provisions.

It will be clear that national and local policy making should be developed in harmony with each other. This is much easier said than done, not only with regard to early child development. There are many examples where promising policies ultimately failed, either because national policy initiatives were not adequately transferred to the local level, or because developments at the local level were not taken over and reinforced by national policy making. It may be hoped that this will not be the case for policies with regard to early child development.

4. Assessing, monitoring and improving the quality of early childhood provisions

Assessment and monitoring of the quality of early child development should focus on the level of the children and the people working with them. The question of which programmes or activities work well for children, can often only be answered over a long period of time. Longitudinal research, which follows children during and beyond their school careers, is of great value in this respect, but its results are not very helpful in the short term. However, to gain some insight into short-term and medium-term effects, it is possible to gather data showing for example the effect of participation in early childhood programmes on school career

variables, such as referral rates to special education, test scores in primary school or social indicators. One cannot expect very refined results from this type of research, such as detailed comparisons of the quality of different programmes, but it does provide some clues about the strengths and weaknesses of programmes.

Monitoring the quality of early childhood programmes and provisions should ideally take place on the basis of formal criteria. These may refer to such aspects as:

- the number of children participating and their social backgrounds (ethnicity, SES, Y)
- the qualifications of staff and teachers
- the goals and the curriculum
- the quality of the building and material equipment
- the parents' views of the quality offered

Actions that need to be taken in order to develop an adequate monitor system include:

- arrangements between policy makers and institutions about the type of information that should be available in order to assess quality
- arrangements about who compiles and supplies what information
- arrangements about the way in which information is collected and processed
- arrangements about transferring information about children, e.g. from pre-school to primary school
- reporting and discussion the outcomes of the monitor
- revising policies on the basis of these outcomes

Sometimes the effectiveness of quality assessment may be enhanced by appointing a review committee that pays regular visits to provisions or programmes (centre-based) in order to evaluate the quality of the work and to give suggestions for improvements. This method seems to be effective, but it is not very popular among the institutions that are visited by such committees.

An interesting model for self-evaluation in pre-school institutions has been developed by the Worcester College of Higher Education under the name of: Effective Early Learning Research Project. This model uses ten dimensions of quality, covering:

- aims and objectives
- curriculum
- learning and teaching styles
- planning, assessment and record keeping
- staffing
- physical environment
- relationships and interaction
- equal opportunities
- parental partnerships, liaison and co-ordination
- monitoring and evaluation

To generate information use is made of documentary analyses, photographs, a physical environment schedule, professional biographies (recording the training, qualifications and experience of the staff), focussed interviews, systematic and focussed observation. Based on these data, and the additional use of the Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children and the Adult Style Observation for Early Childhood Education, a case study of the quality of early learning is made. Following this, an action plan for change is jointly set up by the staff and the researcher. In the third stage this action plan is implemented and finally the people involved reflect on the whole process.

The EELRP approach is particularly interesting because it combines external quality assessment with trategies for improvement. Just as other self-evaluation methods, it requires an open and self- critical attitude of the people involved.

Assessing and monitoring the quality of early childhood provisions is important, because investments in early childhood development will only be made and sustained if there are no fundamental doubts as to the quality of the services offered.

5. Some examples of good practice in the Netherlands

Neighbourhood networks for youth welfare

In many Dutch municipalities neighbourhood networks for youth welfare have been organised. These are small scale networks of people who work daily with the children and youngsters in the neighbourhood. The

objective is to signal problems in an early stage, to find answers for these problems, and to develop a strategy for solving the problem. Participants in the networks are normally teachers, people working in day care centres, physicians, social workers, nurses, school counsellors and police officers. Network meeting are organised monthly of bi - weekly. Participants mention the problems they have encountered and try to find a way to react to the problems. In the meetings new and already known problems are discussed. Teachers from primary schools seem to bring in signals most often. The family problems discussed most often are social isolation, drug addiction and criminality, situations of neglect and maltreatment, housing or financial problems. The problems of the children most discussed are emotional and behavioural problems, suspicion of maltreatment or incest, incapacity of the parents to provide education, neglect.

The networks are quite active and are often able to offer support at short notice. Research indicates that in 60% of the cases improvement has been realised after some time. In about 33% of the cases no change in the situation occurs, in 7% problems have been aggravated.

The neighbourhood networks for youth welfare sometimes organise preventive activities in the neighbourhood, such as information evenings for parents on special topics. An important side effect is that the people and organisations involved become more aware of what other institutions do, become more professional in dealing with complicated problems, and tend to make adaptations in their regular work, based on the experiences in the network.

The Step by Step programs

The Ministry of Welfare, Health and Sport has facilitated the development of a series of programmes for disadvantaged children in the age of 0 - 12 years and their parents. The programmes were mainly, but not exclusively, designed for ethnic minority children and families. A part of the programmes is home based, others focus on schools and parents. Of the home based programmes Opstap renewed for children of 4 - 6 years is the best known. The objective is to foster the cognitive and language development of the children and their socio- emotional development.

Characteristics of the programme are:

- Parents are taught to interact with their children in a way that enhances their development. This aim is pursued with the help of paraprofessionals, who are recruited from the same group as the parents that are visited. So families from Moroccan origin are visited by paraprofessionals from Morrocan origin. Group meetings of mothers and paraprofessionals are organised within the project. Mothers are there given the opportunity to exchange experiences.
- The programme has a clear and fixed structure. As the programme advances, its structure becomes less rigid.
- The programme lasts for two years. For each year, the materials cover thirty weeks. Every week, five days a week, the mother and the child are expected to do a number of exercises, for about ten minutes a day.

The programme is available in for languages: Dutch, Turkish, Arabic, Papiamento. Parents may choose in which language to carry out the programme with their child.

Another very interesting and successful programme in the stepwise programmes is the Stap Door programme. In Stap Door older pupils (about 12 years old), are the tutors of younger children (about 7 years old) in reading. Stap Door aims both at helping children to read better as to improve the social contacts between the children and involving their parents in the process. The tutors are specially trained, in social skills, communicating with other children, and didactics. They also are trained in the principles of reading comprehension. At school time is reserved for sessions where the older and younger children read together. Supporting materials are available, but children may themselves choose the books they want to read together. For their parents special activities are organised by the school or the library. The programme appears to have positive effects with regard to reading comprehension, but even more apparent are the social results. Nearly all the children love this kind of activities and schools report improvement of the social climate within the school. Often the children start doing things together outside of the programme. Older children from disadvantaged groups seem to develop more self esteem when given the role of tutor, which is enhanced because of the training they have received. It should be noted that children are free to decide whether they want to function as tutors, but normally only one or two on 25 to 30 children in a group does not want to be a tutor. The younger

children love the attention they get from other students. The methods children use to explain the meaning of words to each other, are sometimes quite unusual but very effective.

Stap Door is preceded by a program which focuses on children of group three in primary school, when they start to learn reading. Here no tutoring is used, but materials have been developed for the parents to use at home. The words and concepts in these materials reflect the reading method used at school. By repeating these words and concepts in other -more playful- contexts at home, it is hoped that the process of learning to read is enhanced. Overstap is very successful in reaching parents from ethnic minority groups. Often 90% or more of the parents attends the meeting at school and does the programme at home with one or more children.

In the Stap Door project the involvement of parents is a little less successful. This may be a result of the characteristics of the programme, or because parents are more difficult to involve at this stage in the development of the children. It may also be attributed to a new policy by which many parents are forced to take a job, though they have young children, and have less time to do this kind of programmes with their child.

6. Concluding remarks

In the coming years policy makers in European countries will have to decide whether or not to develop national policies for the development and education of young children. They seem to be willing to do so, but it will not be easy and it requires some courage, as the problems described in this paper have made clear.

The conclusions drawn by Robert Myers in his book *The Twelve Who Survive* (London, New York, 1992), though focussed on early child development in developing countries, may also apply to European countries:

1. Millions of children suffer delayed or debilitated development, affecting all later life and carrying high personal and social costs.
2. Scientific research supports early intervention and shows that faltering development can be avoided or overcome.
3. The moral, social, economic, political and programmatic reasons for investment in early development are compelling.

4. Need and demand has grown, affected by socio demographic change.
5. Our knowledge and experiential base for action is sound.
6. Examples of how to foster early development abound.
7. Cost is not the main deterrent to expanded programming.

If a country is convinced of the importance of investing in early childhood development and if there is political will and agreement, major stimuli for early child development may be expected. This should result in concerted actions at the national level, the local level and at the level of the provisions and programmes for young children. Because we are dealing with young children, who are vulnerable, the quality of early child development policies and services should be given high priority indeed.

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Access to Early Childhood Development: Strategies for Enhancing Social Integration

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the linkages between access to early childhood education (ECD) and social exclusion. Both issues are currently gaining ground in Europe, and elsewhere, as major planks of policy and programme development. With all nations exposed to profound and rapid changes, families have to find new ways to remain integrated within their communities and societies and to prepare their children for their future role as participating citizens. It is widely accepted that this preparation should start at an early age. While the majority of children in Europe make use of ECD services, many belong to families that could be described as socially excluded. They do not have access to the basic entitlements that are their due as citizens. This could deprive them of adequate care and development opportunities during the early years, with consequences for their ability to function effectively as adults.

The thesis being forwarded in this paper is that ECD could be used as an effective mechanism for promoting social integration and cohesion. It is argued that ECD can open doors to many other services in society with the result that children and families who are unable to benefit from ECD are doubly handicapped. Creating full accessibility should, therefore, be given the highest political priority. But in order to reach the marginalized and excluded segments, public awareness would have to grow and strategies to improve access to services would need to be introduced. The nature of the services provided would also have to be scrutinized with respect to their suitability for supporting children at risk.

All over Europe major efforts are being made to extend services to children and young families. But these are often underused precisely by those children who would benefit most from them. Lack of services is not the only reason for poor take up. Socially excluded families face many other barriers to full participation.

2. The Importance of Early Childhood Development

The importance of the early months and years of life is now well recognised. The quality of care and interaction provided during this period has an impact on the growth and development of the child. Appropriate care and education during this period has a lasting effect on their intellectual capacity, personality and social behaviour as adults. It is also widely accepted that investing in the development of children yields high rates of return in social as well as in economic terms. Children who have enjoyed early care and education show:

- better readiness for schooling;
- improved school attendance and performance;
- reduced delinquency during teenage years;
- reduced teenage pregnancy;
- reduced need for curative medical attention;
- more social responsibility as adolescents;
- fewer accidents.

There is a high probability that as adults, such children will be more likely to be employed, will enjoy higher incomes, divorce less, have smaller families and display less criminal behaviour. There is also evidence that parents whose children benefit from ECD services grow in competence and their employers find them to be better motivated. There is also a deepening understanding that children need ECD in their own right as children and not just as future adults. They should be recognized as intrinsically important, regardless of their future status, or the outcomes of intervention programmes. All nations have their own specific mechanisms for educating and taking care of young children and these can vary significantly across cultures. Raising children can be the prime responsibility of the parents or can be shared by the extended family or community. Effective care and education can be home-based or can take place in settings outside the home such as in crèches, pre-schools and kindergartens. These services could be organised by the community, be part of State provision, or run on more commercial lines. Good child care inevitably combines attention to physical needs with activities aimed at socialisation; it poses developmental tasks and offers cognitive stimulation.

Children have the right to receive care, even when it cannot be 'proved' that this care will be translated in terms of positive outcomes later on in their lives.

The notion of ECD is increasingly used to describe this whole range of activities but also to include many other things. Parent education, community development and income generating activities are often incorporated in it as is the whole array of policies, programmes and organizations that direct and finance these activities. The inherent danger of linking these clusters under one label is that the latter gets more attention and carries more prestige while the child moves out of sight.

There is a growing debate on what constitutes good quality ECD. There is one school of thought that insists that quality can only be attained through working with well-trained, well-paid professionals who use research-based curricula in well-resourced settings. Another school contends that good results can be obtained by working with less-trained para-professionals who receive a stipend at best, operate under make-shift conditions but make full use of local knowledge and resources and are well-motivated.

The ultimate question in all discussions on ECD should be: what is the benefit for children?

Whatever the outcome of the debate, a consensus is emerging that ECD should encompass a broader approach which is more inclusive and reaches the widest possible audience. It should be participatory and responsive to local needs. It should be community based, should build on local strengths and local child rearing patterns, and should be cost effective and financially feasible. And finally, it should be capable of reaching the largest number of children at risk.

3. Social Inclusion and Exclusion

The term 'social exclusion' is used to describe the position of a variety of groups ranging from ethnic minorities, immigrants, single-parent families, street children, the elderly and unemployed to former prisoners. It was coined in France in the mid Seventies to refer to individuals who were

labelled as social 'problems' or even as social 'misfits' i.e. mentally and physically handicapped people, delinquents, drug addicts. In its current usage, social exclusion has lost this earlier stigmatising and narrow perspective. It is now used to depict the social disadvantages that are caused by the major economic and social transformations that are taking place in society.

The term social exclusion, and with it the associated concepts of inclusion, integration and cohesion, has become common parlance among policy makers in Europe. It presents the image of compassion and solidarity and generates the impression of a collective moral responsibility for social integration. The term reflects the sentiment that all citizens should function well in one society. People should not feel left out or isolated; the romantic notion of living in a village where everybody is known and connected to everybody and everything is seen as exemplary. All citizens should have the wherewithal to get optimal access to the main services and benefits that society has to offer and be able to participate in the processes and activities that are deemed as relevant by the society at large. Policies should create a caring society, a society that successfully copes with the fragmenting and alienating forces and that keeps all its people together in a reasonable state of social well-being, in other words a society for all. Social integration, in this very wide sense, has become a catch phrase for showing that governments really care.

4. Early Childhood Development and Social Integration

The discussion of ECD in the context of social inclusion and exclusion should not come as a surprise. A prime reason is that children show up in demographic statistics as the most vulnerable segment of the population, and also as the quickest to be discarded or excluded. They form the majority of the poor, the sick, and the handicapped. Increasingly, their numbers prevail on the lists of victims of violence, war, discrimination, commercial exploitation, abuse of power, injustice, and environmental degradation. As they are too young and too unequipped to fight for themselves and as their parents are often too powerless and disenfranchised, governments have the obligation to step in.

Another good reason for approaching ECD from a social integration perspective is because it lends itself so well to policy intervention. With

relatively little effort and cost, children can be rescued from leading a marginalised life and can be guided to become well-participating citizens. In this context the word 'cost' should, perhaps, be replaced by 'investment' as monies spent on ECD programmes return manifold.

In the Netherlands, the Averroès Foundation has developed a programme *Step In/MOVE* which seeks to build bridges between mainstream society and young socially excluded families. A crucial feature of the programme is that families as well as municipal agencies can choose from a range of service and programme options and suit these to their own needs.

Most effective intervention programmes boil down to a limited number of rather simple and feasible principles. They are: abiding by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), involving and empowering parents, working in groups, respecting and validating local culture and knowledge, connecting nonformal and formal systems, and embedding local activities in larger, facilitating support structures. The salient common feature of these principles is that they not only have a direct bearing on children but also carry strong integrative powers.

5. Early Childhood Development as a Tool for Social Integration

A strong integrative force in ECD is its facility to bring people together. Everywhere in the world people list the care of their young among their top priorities. ECD is also used as an *entry point* for community development. People readily rally around children and are prepared to undertake joint action for them. They are willing to build facilities, make toys, supervise play groups and sit in meetings and participate on boards, or otherwise lend their time and resources.

ECD can also be a good training ground. Through their participation in ECD, people can gain experience and confidence in relating better to their communities and society as a whole. In particular, parents and *para-professionals* - who are often parents themselves - can discover their own potential and learn new skills by accepting new tasks and responsibilities. These skills are: working in groups, planning, organizing activities, running an administration, conducting and participating in meetings, getting access to information, negotiating and bargaining, defining and resolving problems, defending their own interests, relating to professionals

and civil servants, building and maintaining networks, and acquiring and improving communication abilities. In general, people working in ECD see their social and employability skills grow. Children, their parents and their communities are the immediate *stakeholders* in ECD and stand to benefit from it. For them, ECD is a way out of social exclusion. But what about those segments of society that are firmly integrated? What do they have to gain from ECD programmes directed at children and families other than their own? Two direct advantages spring to mind. The first is that ECD yields high economic returns; instead of having to maintain socially excluded groups, society can now profit from their increased productivity. The second advantage is that communities and nations become more politically stable when their children are being cared for.

ECD enriches society at large in other, indirect ways as well. Since ECD programmes are often carried out in situations of rapid transition and uncertainty they are, by force of circumstances, propelled to find solutions for many new problems and challenges. Some of these problems may seem remote from or may even be unknown to those who are securely anchored in society. However, many of them are already encroaching on all layers of society. Some of the most devastating effects of *globalization*, for example, manifested themselves first at the peripheries of society, but are now increasingly felt by mainstream households as well.

One of the striking outcomes of ECD is the upward social mobility and improved social integration of its workers.

6. Accessing ECD Services

There has been a growth in the availability of early childhood services across Europe in the last few decades. An increasing number of children use day care, after school care, nursery schools, play groups and other formal child care services. But the participation in these services of socially excluded groups such as the chronically unemployed, lone parent, immigrant, ethnic minority and refugee families is limited. In other words, those who are the most vulnerable and most at risk are also the most excluded from them.

A variety of reasons explain this phenomenon. The lack of universal and effective provision for early child care and education could be a

primary reason. In addition, if the services available are mainly in the independent, commercial sector then those who cannot afford them are automatically excluded from them. In this context, ECD can easily become an elitist device. Children may be set on a track very early in life which may lead them away rather than towards integration. Top universities, for example, tend to dominate the curriculum of high schools; these, in turn, determine the educational climate in the schools, kindergartens, and pre-schools, closing out all those who cannot cram into the few slots available. In many aspects, early education facilities carry the stereotypes and biases of the dominant society against girls, specific ethnic, socio-economic, religious or language groups, or the physically and mentally handicapped.

ECD has shown to be a breeding ground for innovative and creative work with relevance for almost everybody. Mainstream society has a great deal to learn from what is happening here.

But even where ECD services are widely available, they may be out of the reach of the most disadvantaged groups on account of a lack of awareness and demand, poor information, a mismatch between the needs of the parents and the services available or because of the quality of the services. There may also be individual reasons for low uptake of services other then poverty, structural unemployment and discrimination. Psychological distress, ill health, physical handicap, substance abuse, family violence and poor or non-existent marital bonds are increasingly turning into divisive and excluding instruments. Children living in these circumstances find it hard to gain access to ECD services. Their families are less empowered and less prepared for community action.

7. Strategies for Improving Access to ECD Services

There are innumerable biases against reaching the unreachable. Most of these are deeply engrained and pervasive and call for a profound understanding of the causes of exclusion and of the system that seeks to break it. There are, however, a number of strategies that are promising. These strategies and their underlying principles have been largely tested in developing countries. They have proven to be effective, often under extreme conditions and in a variety of circumstances. Central to these principles are the core values of equity, respect for diversity and dialogue.

Strategies for improving the access of the most marginalized families to ECD services can be organized under four domains:

- client-centred: these strategies respond to the needs and wishes of the *client-audience* and to the contexts in which they live.
- programme-centred: here the features of the programme and its delivery are considered.
- policy-centred: these refer to the policy level approaches that are required to sustain and expand effective ECD.
- organization-centred: these are the institutional and management inputs that are needed to promote ECD and deliver effective ECD services?

Client-centred strategies

Empowering potential users would be a first step in any client-centred strategy. Parents need to feel confident about their role as the prime educators and care givers of their children. ECD should solicit and legitimatise parental and other forms of local knowledge. It should also value the *meaning* that parents and the local community attach to the socialisation of their young ones. From the beginning of time, children have been looked after at home by mothers, older relatives or by siblings. Informal arrangements outside the home are also used as a low-cost alternative in many countries. There is nothing intrinsically inferior about the quality of care provided to children in these settings. All that children need is 'an average, good environment' to thrive, regardless of the specificities of this environment. This requires that children are safe, get proper health care, are fed and can play and interact regularly with at least one reliable adult. If these conditions are met children will, in the main, develop quite normally. The point here is that in Europe, as elsewhere in the world, this average, good environment is rapidly eroding and with it the innate skills of many parents.

Restricting the delivery of ECD to 'professionals' can have the unpleasant consequence of disempowering parents and devaluing their role as care givers. In essence, empowerment is an intentional, ongoing and dynamic process focussed on the family and local community. It involves mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation. It enables people to gain access to a valid share of resources as well as an increased leverage on power. Families that are socially excluded for a variety of reasons may have considerable skills in ECD and may be using

informal and non-formal means for the care and development of their children. Recognition and validation of their efforts would constitute a notable first step in increasing their self-confidence and thus removing an important barrier to social integration.

In order to be effective, strategies for improving access to ECD should see families, and not individual children, as units of intervention. All members of the family should be enabled to develop their competencies and programmes should be directed at their intersecting needs.

Empowerment of socially excluded groups often necessitates the intervention of outside agents. The manner in which agents relate to these groups is essential. In this context, the notion of *partnership*, rather than that of *giver and taker* is gaining ground.

Although mothers have rightfully been identified as critical mediators between children and their environment, the role of fathers needs to be reviewed and upgraded. Empowerment, foremost, means the strengthening of the personal and social networks of families and their members and their capacity to work in groups.

Creating an awareness of the importance of ECD and providing information about the benefits and services that are available is another way of targeting strategies towards clients from marginalized groups. Better awareness will inevitably lead to a demand for better and more services as well as to joint action to meet local needs. *Demand-driven* interventions are more effective and relevant than *supply-driven* services. The *participation* of the target group in expressing local needs, in finding solutions to common problems, in contributing to the design and delivery of programmes will also go a long way towards assuring uptake of services and increasing their effectiveness. Creating awareness is most effective as a group process and, as members of a group, parents will quickly discover that they need ECD and find their way to it.

Strategies aimed at potential users will be successful only if there is sufficient information about the culture and special needs of marginalized and at-risk groups. This makes it necessary to go beyond general statistics and gather *documentation* and *information* about specific groups.

Qualitative descriptions of traditional practices, materials that validate the many efforts of parents and other care givers, and ethnographic and anthropological studies are needed to fill the gaps in macro level data. Their inclusion would acknowledge individual, cultural and situational differences, locate local strengths and assets and make delivery of centrally managed services more sensitive and sustainable. It would also help to reconcile needs of children as perceived by outsiders and as expressed by the parents and children themselves.

Most information on ECD flows within a restricted community, much of which is *preaching to the converted*. There is hardly any *spill over* of information to the other groups that make up society, even to those who are not socially excluded. It is not far-fetched to state that, for example, the military establishment, the business community, or the political parties should also take part in information exchange about ECD. In the end, it is a matter for the public at large.

Programme-centred strategies

It would be fair to say that the most innovative and promising intervention programmes are those which respond to what is happening at the grass roots level, which involve as many key players as possible, including parents, community and other stakeholders, and have strong informal networks. They also draw on local practices, programmes and activities. Not surprisingly, *building on local strengths* is widely accepted as the main principle in human development. ECD programmes for socially excluded groups will be successful only if they are rooted in the community and focus on local assets rather than on weaknesses or gaps. It is equally important that ECD programmes are connected to services geared towards older children and youth in order to ensure ongoing healthy development.

A comprehensive approach to programme development, which takes account of the intersecting needs of parents and children, is required. Socially excluded families are likely to suffer from multiple disadvantages. The common picture is of a mother who is either on welfare or underemployed. She has few relatives, friends or acquaintances she could consult or be comforted by. She mistrusts the outside world and stays away from statutory agencies and their professionals including

kindergartens and teachers. Her physical condition is poor and she is in a light depression. She cares about her children but is not in a position to mediate between them and society and provide them with optimal education. In turn, her children may not develop well, may under-perform and lose out on what society has to offer. They are locked in a vicious circle from which it is hard to escape without outside intervention.

In order to reach such marginalized and at-risk families, ECD programmes should use complementary approaches, combining action for children with empowering parents, providing support to families and other care givers, community development, strengthening institutions that work with children and families and advocacy. ECD services tend to operate in a vacuum and are rarely part of a larger system of interlinked policies, interventions, agencies and services. People engaged in ECD services should ideally be active participants in a network that also includes, for example, people that represent the police, social work, health services, unemployment schemes, the business community, schools, researchers and even recreational services.

In theory, intervention programmes aim for large-scale coverage, effectiveness and speedy implementation. In practice, they hardly ever score on all three criteria. Usually, large-scale programmes are ineffective, while effective programmes are restricted to small numbers of children. In most instances, their implementation takes a great deal of time. Experience also shows that large scale programmes are most effective when they allow for maximum local input and control. Their coverage expands most rapidly if project staff are members of networks that are extensive and intensive and if project experience can be shared readily.

Policy-centred strategies

Policy, in essence, is about creating a vision that inspires, motivates, guides and sustains people in their efforts to bring about change. A new vision on children, encapsulated in the CRC, is gradually emerging but it requires consistent follow up and application to have any effect. Three policy instruments are increasingly gaining currency in ECD. These are *agenda setting*, *networking* and *social movements*. A common feature about these instruments is that they are strongly inter-connected and they appeal to all stake holders in ECD. Governments and NGO's, in particular

have to collaborate to put ECD on the agenda, to effectively network or get a social movement going.

The challenge for policy makers is to establish ECD as a structural approach to integrating children and families at risk. A first step to this end is to create an environment in which this assignment is fully understood and appreciated. NGO's can play an important advocacy role in getting governments to develop an outspoken *policy agenda* committed to migrant, minority groups, unaccompanied refugee children and children living in especially difficult circumstances.

Without earmarking and identification of adequate resources policies will remain an empty promise. Devolution of resources to local authorities may be a key policy-centred strategy in assuring that the resources get through to the children and families for whom they are intended. But, devolution will be effective only if mechanisms for accountability, monitoring and evaluation are set up.

Organization-centred strategies

It is often overlooked that programmes need organisational, administrative and management support. The effectiveness of programmes and policies often improves considerably when the institutional capacity of implementing agencies is addressed. A new demand on ECD organizations is that they should be capable of working with other groups and function in outcome-oriented networks.

The comprehensive and pervasive nature of the problems facing marginalised families demands a co-ordinated response from the different agencies providing services for children and families. Excessive fragmentation can lead to unequal access and duplication of efforts. Reorganization or the creation of new structures may be required to improve *collaboration, and linkages* between agencies. Of special significance are linkages between organisational structures serving pre-school age children, as well as older children and youth.

It is clear from the discussion that the four strategies are interrelated. Action in any one dimension will be effective only if there is a synergistic relationship between the dimensions.

The most frequent organization-centred strategy is to set up umbrella agencies. A case could be made for setting up an overall body that could *monitor* the situation of excluded groups and signal problems. At the most basic level, such a monitor could gather data on children and families, their needs, the services that are offered to them, how many participate and who and how many are left out, or require special attention. Governments have the main responsibility for setting up such a monitor while Non Governmental Organizations (NGO's) could play a role in gathering data about groups that are traditionally hard to reach.

Co-operation between government and NGO's would also be key in assuring the success of strategies for improving access to ECD services. The role of NGO's in combatting social exclusion is well recognised. NGO's can identify the varying needs of specific communities and respond to them in a flexible and innovative manner. They can bridge the information gap between services and marginalised groups and can effectively undertake advocacy on behalf of these groups. This is particularly true for those NGO's that consist of, or are functionally linked to, grassroots organizations and other community groups. Because of these characteristics, they can cater to those elusive groups that governmental agencies find hard to reach.

8. Some Queries

ECD services are expanding at a steady rate all over the world, including in Europe and more children and families are participating in them than ever before. There is also sufficient reason to believe that many disadvantaged children are included in these services. For most children, the future certainly looks brighter than before. But problems remain and questions need to be raised to address them. The first concerns the quality of services. Are the services designed for disadvantaged families adequate? Or, are they second-rate and therefore reinforcing disadvantage? Do they promote the overall development of children and do they help to overcome the barriers that exclude them from full participation in society?

The second question is whether expanding ECD services reach the hard-core of socially excluded families in any substantial manner? Are there groups of families in Europe that are more socially excluded then ever before? Could it be said that there is a causal relationship between

current social and economic policies - which seek to serve the majority - and the emergence of a small minority of hard-core unreachable groups?

Most ECD programmes in use in Europe are pretty standard and apart from some contextual features share many similarities. This is despite their claims of being innovative, alternative, or experimental. Most programmes now tend to include parents, promote family, school and community linkages, and pursue the holistic development of children. But is this sufficient? Do these programmes keep pace with the realities that children have to face? Should ECD not be extended to child abuse, domestic violence, addiction and neglect? Another development which is increasingly affecting children, even the very young, is globalization. What is known about its impact on the development of children. What new problems and challenges does it pose for them? To make significant headway in ECD, these questions need to be tackled with some urgency.

Early Childhood Policy: Implications for Large Scale Implementation

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1. Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) has become increasingly a central issue in policy discussions. Most recently, the OESO report on lifelong learning[1] stressed the importance of early learning. National policies like Head Start (USA), Educational Priority Areas (UK) and the *école maternelle* (France) show how policy can be conducted in the early education field. In the Netherlands, interesting examples of early childhood education are found too, which I shall discuss later.

Internationally, there is also much discussion about effective policy in ECE and much agreement. Some confusion over terminology exists, e.g. early childhood education, early childhood development and early childhood care. Because parents are mostly involved in the early years, one speaks about early childhood education *and* parent involvement as two sides of the same coin. There are also the terms pre-schooling or pre-school education. I shall go into these notions later having first explored two important questions: what are the possibilities for large-scale implementation, in particular with regard to quality and costs. The second question is how to position ECE in the process of life-long learning, particularly in the context of the forthcoming century and specifically, of the information age.

Another important issue is the focus of the Conference, the issue of disadvantaged children. Disadvantaged children entering school at the age of 4 to 6 already show significant delays in development, which remain or increase in the years to follow at school. Drop out from school or removal to special kinds of education is then the next step. Hence, governments are thinking about new policies starting in the early years aimed at bridging the gap between disadvantaged and mainstream before entry to school. I shall therefore discuss ECE also as an effective strategy in preparing children and parents for school. In this regard, I shall refer to the Dutch

[1]. OESO, lifelong learning for all, Paris, OECD, 1996.

experience in ECE, especially focused on children and their parents. I shall end the paper with some conclusions and discussion.

2. Early Childhood Education

One of the most important movements in Western Europe in the early years is the enormous growth of early childhood care. The reason for this is, of course, the emancipation of women who demand participation in the labour force while having children. In many countries, early childhood care is increasingly provided, although national systems differ widely and rights to parental leave is poorly regulated in some countries. However, the term *care* is rather ambiguous. In some discussions, people talk about *care*, meaning care and education. In other contexts, *care* means working essentially with disadvantaged children In short, *care* is not implicitly education nor does care necessarily mean working with disadvantaged children. Care can equally mean focusing on all children - including non-immigrant children with educated parents.

On the other hand, the term early childhood *education* is the historical term, but for some experts, early education is too linked to preparation for school instead of preparation for living. In my opinion, however, it is clearer to include early care, education and development as part of *lifelong learning*. In the early years, we experience different educational systems than later in life. At that moment, we expect parents to be more involved and children to learn essentially through play. Yet, I presume that we are still talking about education. In this paper, I shall use therefore the term *early childhood education*.

A further issue is: what are the benefits of early childhood education? Moreover, if benefits really exist, do they last? Underlying these questions is another one, namely: why are we so interested in results of early childhood education? Is it because we are so convinced that education always has results? Is it because we have parents involved and do not have enough faith in parents? Is it because we have poorly educated teachers running early childhood centres and we do not expect results? Is it because we are afraid that the costs of early childhood education must detract from the budget of in-school education? Or, is it that we do not believe in educational models other than the historical classroom?

All of these questions are a little true and may inspire the policy-makers to ask researchers to find the most effective early childhood education model (if their is one model and not different ones). Recent research suggests three things:

First the answer to the question posed 'Do the benefits of early childhood education last'?[2] The answer is qualified 'yes' - quality early intervention programs such as Head Start can make a difference to long-term cognitive attainment. In this sense, our work is more hopeful than much of the early work examining early intervention outcomes suggested. Second, although Head Start appears to have similar initial effects on children from different backgrounds, the extent to which the effects are sustained varies between groups. The fact that the initial effects are similar suggests that the reasons for differential fadeout may lie in the larger society, beyond the reach of pre-school educators. Third, we need to know more about the specific conditions that undermine gains to cognitive achievements so that we can safeguard early societal investments in the most vulnerable children.[3]

Research from the High/Scope program[4] provides some evidence from which we can talk about clear long-term effects. After good quality early childhood education over a period of one or two years, children drop out less from school, and later: are less unemployed, earn more money, are less in jail etc.[5] Studying the research on the prevention of delinquency, Junger-Tas comes to the conclusion that early childhood education programs can make a difference but is also very shocked of the scarcity of research in the field of ECE, especially in Europe.[6]

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[2]. Do the benefits of early childhood education last? Janet Currie and Duncan Thomas, in: Policy Options, July/August 1997, Canada.

[3]. Idem., page 49

[4]. High Scope has developed an educational system (the Perry Pre-school Program) for children aged 2.5-6 years, based on active learning and especially designed for disadvantaged children in the USA. Its programmes are used in a number of countries

[5]. Barnett, W. S. (1996) Lives in the balance. The High/Scope press, Michigan.

[6]. Junger-Tas, M. (1996) Jeugd en Gezin (Youth and Family), Preventie vanuit een justitiel perspectief, The Hague, Ministry of Justice.

3. Early Childhood Education and the information age

When we discuss the future policy of early childhood education and then especially focus on disadvantaged children, we must not close our eyes to the information age of which we are increasingly a part. With the computer, Internet, e-mail and more and more television channels, the information age is a fact of society.

Because of the overwhelming information flow and information technology, we shall need in the near future to become more focused on learning (lifelong learning) than around work. In this context, the family will be a fundamental learning environment as the workplace will be a learning organisation. The neighbourhood will not remain the most stable integrating factor in the child's life because of families moving a lot and both parents working. Hence the family will become more important and institutions like school, pre-school, neighbourhood centre will gain in importance. The community school as an integrating factor could be of big importance for the family in the near future. An important part of the community school experience will be early education, which will become more valued as the basis of lifelong learning. The OESO report on sustainable flexibility[7] gives some indication concerning targets to be set in early childhood education for the coming information age. First, in the changed society of the information age, the family must become the integrating centre of the child's learning environment. Second, problem solving skills, organising oneself to learn, learning to co-operate and communicate, developing networking and teaching skills may be more important than cognitive skills as such. In brief, involving the family on the one hand and adapting curricula on the other will be essential elements in early childhood policy-making in the information age.

4. Early Childhood Education and social policy

We have already stressed the choice of working in ECE with disadvantaged children and their parents. Early childhood is also an essential part of social policy. Thus, De Vijlder[8] sees ECE as a powerful

[7] OESO Sustainable flexibility, a prospective study on work, family, society in the information age, Paris, OECD, 1997.

[8] Vijlder, F. de (Between expansion of education and innovative social policy) Tussen onderwijsexpansie en innovatieve sociale politick in: Vemieuwing, Tijdschrift voor Onderwijs en Opvoeding, Jaargang 46, nummer 9, November 1997.

socio-political instrument. From the end of the Second World War, education gave people the opportunity to gain a position in society, independent of social class. The expansion of education resulted in people getting better jobs than their parents had. The information age will go beyond this development. Unskilled workers will be less in demand and all workers will be required to work at higher levels of social and emotional capacity.[9] In this context, early education will be not only an important element of social policy but also a vital instrument of educational policy. This depends on one other matter and that is, the scale on which ECE will be offered to disadvantaged groups. Our reason for emphasising this point stems from a tendency that has become apparent over the last 50 years. As soon as a group or generation reaches a certain level of education, the upper part of the group tends to seek out educational qualifications and diplomas at an ever-higher level. This phenomenon results in education becoming even more important for one's position in society and in social inequality being increasingly associated with lowly educated groups. In that sense, we can conclude that if education is to diminish social equality, early childhood education, in particular, must be focused on disadvantaged children and their parents.

5. Views on large-scale implementation

Thinking about going-to-scale is generally determined by two views: universalist and contextual. Proponents of the former view, share a belief in universal principles that can be applicable to a very wide band of practices and situations. The dissemination effort is supply determined. In contrast, the second approach is termed contextual - the emphasis here being on local practice, local initiative, spontaneity, mutual learning and problem solving.[10]

ECE generally starts at local neighbourhood level, mostly with volunteers coming together to found, for example, a kindergarten. Over time, neighbourhood ECE practice enters into a process of professionalisation which gives better results when both central and local governments are involved alongside local organisations, for in order to become professional, early childhood practice needs the input of central

[9]. OESO Report, idem.

[10]. Van Oudenhoven, Nico and Wazir, Rekha, Youth Policies and Programmes, Strategies for Dissemination. Paper prepared for the international conference "Challenge of Change-3", Amsterdam 10-14 January 1996.

government, e.g. the development of curricula, training programs, research, monitoring of quality etc. At the same time, it can be argued that central policies need to reflect and respond to the local contexts.

6. Early Childhood Education: the Dutch experience

In the Netherlands, educational policy focuses today on smaller classrooms for younger children and on decentralisation of responsibilities to the level of the school and the level of the local municipalities. For example, the school nowadays owns the school building and has its own maintenance budget. The budget for educational priority policy to cater for disadvantaged children is now decentralised to local government and municipalities.

These instances have already played a role in social policy by subsidising neighbourhood centres etc. and now can link their own local social policy to educational policy in working with disadvantaged children and their parents.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture together with the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (ECE is often part of more than one Ministry) are experimenting with different programmes for children from two-and-a-half to six years. Attention is given to curriculum development (Pyramid and Kaleidoscope) and to disadvantaged children and their parents.

Some ten years ago, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport began to create ECE policies in favour of disadvantaged children and their parents. Parents were the primary target group and were educated by other (paid paraprofessional) parents about the play and learning of the child. Every week the paraprofessional visited the mother at home, bringing materials, first to work with the mother and later with mother and child. Surveys showed that mothers took up this activity with great pleasure.

Some programs were developed for volunteer workers while other programs were based on school programmes, e.g. Opstap Opnieuw. Working with parents became very successful and, as a programme, still reaches large groups of disadvantaged families. One of the success factors was the use of paraprofessional women coming from the same group as the target group, e.g. Moroccan immigrant women were guided by a paid

Moroccan paraprofessional. During the years of the experiment, new methods were found to involve parents in more efficient and less costly ways. 'Working with intermediary women (or men) to «reach the unreached» remains a very good strategy. Today, over 30.000 disadvantaged parents and children enjoy intensive ECE programmes.

An important element in this successful experience is the co-operation that has existed between the national government, national NGOs, local government and local NGOs. The national government formulated national ECE policies and stimulated policy-making at local government level. Programs were developed by national NGOs, tried out in different local settings and then implemented with the support of the national government. After three to four years, central funding stopped (decreasing from 100% to 75% to 50 %) and local government (in some cases, schools) then became responsible. At the same time, budgets for educational priority policy and for welfare were decentralised to local government. In practice, 98% of the local municipalities and/or schools took over the national policy. Nowadays, they reach a significant part of the target group of disadvantaged children in the Netherlands, but there remains a problem. When new policy like ECE is being implemented it means that new financial resources have to be found and not all can be found locally.

An interesting aspect in this example is the extremely good co-operation between:

- *national government* (program policy, regulations, large-scale national financing, temporary finances for local implementation),
- *national NGOs* (program development, implementation, training and guidance, monitoring, influencing policy),
- *local government* (integrating local policy, demanding finances from national government, funding partly ECE locally, giving assignments to local NGOs, monitoring and control),
- *local NGOs* (proposing an ECE project in the neighbourhood, implementing a program, co-operating with different groups and organisations in the neighbourhood, taking care that the personnel will be trained, buying materials and methods, monitoring and guiding the programmes).

This co-operation must be based on quality management and trust on all four levels. To conclude, in ECE and in large-scale implementation, the

use of paraprofessionals is possible, and is a good way to reach disadvantaged families and the unreached.

The Dutch experience in ECE is important in showing how to work with parents within a decentralised system in which national and local government and NGOs are involved in educational policy for disadvantaged children.

7. Early Childhood Education and large scale implementation (LSI)

We have discussed the use of ECE in combating social exclusion and concluded that ECE can play an important role in preparing children from disadvantaged groups for the information age. We have referred also to programmes in the Netherlands involving parents in ECE and have discussed centralised and decentralised options for policy-making. However, some questions have not yet been answered concerning large-scale implementation of ECE and firstly: what do we need before we can begin large-scale implementation. The following elements are important to mention:

- *A good programme.* This means that we need to develop one or more curriculum based programs for ECE, based on the best existing practice in the ECE field and that leave room for teachers and children. There must be a fundamental and practical answer to the questions: what are the children going to do, to learn; how will they interact and achieve their developmental potential?

- *Experience.* This means that before starting LSI, we need to build up experience by trying out programs, methods etc. in different circumstances. We need to study these experiments and even translate them into training. Inviting experienced experts from different countries can also help.

- *Finances.* For LSI, it is important to be clear concerning costs and what existing and/or new finances are available or will become available for ECE policy from central and/or decentralised budgets, e.g. from education, social policy, policy for disadvantaged children, labour market policy, etc. Since many policy fields are involved, the creation of a policy group working in different Ministries could be a good start.

- *Government support.* Early childhood care generally starts in the family and programmes at neighbourhood level. Existing ECE is still, in fact, partly based on work by NGO'S, volunteers, local organisations and local government. For successful LSI, however, support from government, both local and central, is essential: to professionalise, to regulate, to create and work within a broader policy context and for co-operation to take place at field level with education, health, sports, or welfare agencies.

- *A structured system of working.* For LSI, we need a method to move from one step to the next. The implementation system must be well thought through.

- *Contact with local groups.* In the Netherlands, large-scale implementation in early childhood education is based on years of experience both in villages and big cities. To implement ECE locally requires contact with local groups of professionals in education, care and health, with local disadvantaged groups, with neighbourhood politicians and parents. Suitable people from the target groups need to be identified to reach the target groups as effectively as possible.

8. LSI and the maintenance of quality

The second question concerns large-scale implementation and the maintenance of quality. The Dutch experience with ten different ECE programs working with disadvantaged groups gives us the following criteria for maintaining quality:

- *Initial training.* LSI suggests that we take care that people starting a new ECE activity are trained about targets, activities and methods of reaching groups.

- *Follow up training.* Initial training provides a good start to workers in ECE. However, regular in-training to meet the different challenges raised during work is also necessary. As yet, the field of ECE is not sufficiently developed. New situations in the field are continually being experienced and must be discussed; new theory is continually coming through and must be brought to the field. In addition, we are

more and more a part of the information age. For workers in ECE, lifelong learning is necessary.

- *ECE is a field of experience, growing experience.* People in the field need to meet each other to explore more answers, new methods, and better quality. Regional meetings can be a good means to reach each other and advance the quality-process.

- *Monitoring as a service.* Monitoring of activities in ECE is very important for national policy as an evaluation of inputs. At the same time, monitoring of activities is also necessary for management purposes and to justify activities toward local municipalities, who are mostly the donors. As long as monitoring serves the targets of local management, it will survive. The monitoring framework can be centrally developed, but must be for 80 % of the time, an answer to local needs for information. By collecting local data, a national monitoring system can be built.

- *Continuous development of materials in a client-oriented manner.* As a young field, ECE needs to develop many materials for both children and parents. A central question is whether they like to work with the materials, for apart from the quality of the content, an important target will be to make learning fun. It is well to remember that parents, especially in the disadvantaged groups, may have had negative experiences with education. Only in this way can a sound basis for life-long learning be laid.

- *Research.* Maintenance of quality and quality growth has to be combined with research. Field research, long term research and fundamental research are all important to focus on in Europe. Comparative research across countries in Europe is also necessary.

- *Flexibility.* Quality in ECE is still an open question. Many questions are still not completely answered. Much experience is still being gained and has yet to become part of national policy. For national policy makers, this means being flexible and to learn from local expertise so as to build up quality ECE policies.

- *Keeping a clear policy.* Knowing what you want is always important, but even more so in the ECE field. Schools of thought among early childhood specialists can be extreme. National policymakers, therefore, must give clear guidelines for national ECE policy. Otherwise, every neighbourhood will tend to make its own ECE policy, creating differences so great that national quality development will remain impossible.

9. Outstanding Issues

The debate on ECE is far from being completed. This is in particular true for large-scale implementation. Some of the most pertinent outstanding issues concern the relationships between decentralised and centralised policies, the definition of ECE, the role of the family in the information age, and the link between school-based and out-of-school ECE.

Decentralised and centralised policies. Effective ECE is rooted in the community and is supported by a centralised policy. The challenge is to strike the right balance between local initiatives and national concerns and requirements.

Definition of ECE. Many parallel and competitive definitions exist. We suggest that a consensus is possible by focusing on the *outcomes* of working with young children. Early childhood education, concerned with the development of the whole child, has many outcomes. These outcomes should encompass the widest possible range of growth and developmental goals.

The role of the family in the information age. As we have seen above, the information age will require the capacity for life-long learning. The basis of this learning is laid in the young family, which if it is not adapted to the information age runs the risk of becoming socially excluded. To what extent are young families prepared for this task?

School-based and out-of-school ECE. In many countries, it is accepted that the school should assume a larger role in the life of children. In a true sense of the word, it should become a *community school* that is able to integrate early education and educational processes occurring out of school and in the family.

Emerging Issues

The major conclusions of the Conference are found in the *Concluding Statement* in Annex 1. Although participants made many corrections to the initial draft of the *Concluding Statement*, time did not allow the full and complete checking of each and every paragraph or its formal adoption in plenary session. However, the *Statement* in its present form enjoyed the general support of the Conference participants and provides a synthetic overview of international action on behalf of young children. It treats the concept of holistic development; the benefits of early childhood development; the Conference proceedings and the challenges still facing European policy makers.

In addition to those challenges, we shall briefly identify in this section six policy issues that emerged strongly from the Conference and that will no doubt receive attention in the coming years.

1. ***Early childhood care and education as a priority area in social and educational policy making, in response to multiple societal needs.***

A striking feature of the Conference, which comes through the *Concluding Statement*, is the consciousness of a new dynamism inhabiting the early childhood policy field, a consciousness that early care and education has come of age. There are several reasons for this renewed interest, not least the question of European demography and the effect it will have on early care. Europe is ageing rapidly. Despite rising productivity, its work force is destined to decrease significantly in numbers. In response to this situation and also because young women in European countries reach higher educational standards than young men, energetic efforts will be made to bring women, the traditional carers of young children, into the labour market. Obviously, early childhood provision will remain an important European policy issue for many years to come.

In addition, the polyvalence of the field is attracting the attention of policy makers. When intelligently conceived, early childhood programming can meet many needs:

- ensuring the protection, development and education of young children;

- giving a fair start in life for all children and a preparation for successful integration into the education system;
- providing an opportunity for the early detection of special need and learning disability;
- acting as a centre for socialisation and social integration;
- constituting an educational and social investment in the human capital of the nation, that is, in young children and parents;
- helping women to gain equal opportunity in the labour market;
- providing a privileged locus for service integration.

However, the Conference proceedings would give one to believe that not all countries have re-conceptualised the early care and education field or established the conditions that would allow early services to respond adequately to such complex social and educational needs.

2. ***Early development programming as a social and educational service to two generations, not just to young children alone.***

In traditional pre-school education and social services, early care and education was viewed as centre-based provision for children, abstracted in so far as possible from parents and family environment. It was primarily considered as either a human resources investment in the care and education of the young or as a labour market investment to allow young mothers to return to work. Though these aims are still important, perhaps even central, in early childhood planning, they are no longer the sole reasons for investment. Early development services are now organised in many instances to cater for wider educational and social needs. The period is seen as an opportune one to deliver education of different types to parents, e.g. parenting education, life skills, personal development programmes and even job-training. Likewise, social welfare planners recognise that the deep attachment of parents to children and their aspirations for their future are a firm motivational base on which to build social integration programmes. Thus, by drawing immigrant parents to participate in home- or centre-based programmes for young children, municipalities take the opportunity to offer further services and to provide a natural induction into the language and social customs of the host country. However, in this field, social integration planning toward both parents and children seems to be further advanced than educational

planning. There still exists a reluctance to see early childhood as an opportune period for the lifelong education for parents.

3. ***The integration of services in the early childhood care and education field.***

Because it has the capacity to respond to multiple social and educational needs of families, early childhood provision should be a privileged locus of integrated service delivery. In addition to education, health and social welfare ministries, many government departments, statutory and voluntary agencies are involved in family matters, e.g. youth ministries or justice secretariats catering for the needs of older children and young adults, or labour ministries, trade unions and employers in policy making in the field of reconciling work with family responsibility. In addition, the early childhood and family field is further dispersed by policies of decentralization and diversification. However, although very good examples exist in Europe of integrated services, most departments are only in the initial stages of conceptualizing and implementing integration. Conference participants corroborated on many occasions the research findings of the OECD (see for example, *Co-ordinating Services for Children and Youth at Risk*, Paris, OECD, 1998), which underline the need, complexity and advantages of integrated services.

4. ***The involvement of the clients in early care and education, in particular, children with special needs, parents and bridging personnel from target groups.***

Children with special education needs have a right to be included not just integrated as a favour in all public programmes, especially in early care and education programmes where their social and educational needs can be met most effectively. Not only is their inclusion at the earliest age vital for early detection but it is also a gage of new standards in education that ensure attention to the needs of each individual child. Renewed training of educators will be necessary in this regard, in addition to allowing professional and auxiliary personnel from other services into schools.

The active involvement of parents will also become an issue, not only because early development programmes are seen to include parental education but also because participation is important in its own right.

Although states have responsibilities to provide social protection or national curricula, families cannot be the mere objects of state care. Programmes supporting young children and families will also encourage self-organization, the basis for empowerment of individuals and groups. In addition, they will be based on values such as dialogue and respect for diversity.

The same arguments are valid for the employment of bridging persons from target groups in early development programmes. However, the presence of such persons is also justified for reasons of efficacy. The Conference participants encouraged wide use of this practice that target group para-professionals should work alongside child professionals in order both to sensitize the professional service providers to the unvoiced needs of local communities and to encourage these communities to approach and make use of professional services.

5. ***The challenges posed by decentralization and diversification of early childhood services.***

National State systems have traditionally attempted to guarantee, at least in principle, standardization of access and quality. Research is needed now on how to decentralize budgets, policy and service delivery so that effective programmes are delivered to low-income families and equity maintained through affirmative action. Not only may certain groups be overlooked because of lack of voice or purchasing power, but the danger exists that parental education and *welfare to work* policies should predominate in the poorer part of the system while high quality educational standards for children emerge as the priority in the more up-market sector. Likewise, when the system remains too open, it may be destabilized by incoherent, project-led policies rather than evolving a more structured approach to child and family needs, shared by both central and local authorities. On the other hand, the tightly coupled system does not easily allow experimentation or the dissemination of new concepts and policies in response to changing circumstances.

6. *The need for a co-ordinating mechanism and an on-going policy agenda or forum for Europe.*

European countries have much to learn from each other in the area of early childhood programming. Conference delegates voiced this belief many times during the proceedings, thanking the Government of the Netherlands for providing the opportunity to compare policy and practice in European countries. The need to align programming approaches and educational levels across Europe was also expressed so that the mobility of parents with young children might be ensured without the necessity of undergoing disruptive or even traumatic transitions. The European governments with their many statutory and voluntary bodies have the main responsibility for advancing policies for young children, aided by the various international organizations invited to the Conference, such as the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the OECD, UNESCO and UNICEF. Support both for an annual conference and the creation of a new European networking mechanism to promote common early childhood policies across the Continent would be a practical and welcome outcome of the Conference.

Annexes

Annex 1

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

International action on behalf of the young child

1. On 29 November 1989, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The Convention heralds a giant step forward toward the universal recognition of the importance of children and childhood and toward ensuring them a better situation in the world. In particular, the CRC is welcomed for its:

   - Insistence that all childhood policies should first and foremost serve the best interests of children and that children in especially difficult circumstances should have first call on the resources and protection of the State;
   - Requirement that all children, including refugee and minority children and children with special needs, should have rights to basic health, social security, education and special protection on a basis of equality and with due regard to the primary responsibility of families;
   - Affirmation that the family, as "the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members, and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities."

2. At its 29th General Conference last year, UNESCO resolved to heighten its efforts to raise awareness within the global community of the situation of young children and their families. In particular, UNESCO pledged to:

   - Call on governments to work towards the social integration and continuing education of disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups;
   - Share the vast experience in human-development policy available in both low-income and high-income countries.

3. In July 1997, the European Commission presented its "European Agenda 2000" to the European Parliament. In this report, the maintenance of social cohesion across Europe is upheld as a major objective.

4. Subsequent to the formulation and adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in November 1989, great strides for children have been made. Everywhere in the world, more pre-school-age children are receiving proper care and education. It is widely accepted that children need to develop in a holistic manner, to function well in a range of domains and to respond to a range of developmental tasks - physical, psychological, social and cognitive. Early childhood development and education (ECDE) is recognised both as an essential strategy in the social development policies of European countries and as a necessary means of facilitating the successful adaptation of young children to primary schooling. Within the framework of *Education For All*, many countries are extending school education to include five-year olds or even four-year olds, a move welcomed by parents when the specificity of the early childhood period is recognised and developmentally appropriate practices are used. European countries, in addition, have made important investments to ensure the early care and education of young children and so allow women equality of access to the labour market.

The Concept of Holistic Development

5. In spite of these many positive developments, much remains to be done. For one, survival is not the same as development. Nations have learned how to keep more children alive, but have they also learned how to give them proper education and care? Although more and more children are benefiting from early development programmes, some groups of the population find it increasingly hard to make use of these services and indeed, in some countries, certain categories of children, e.g. children with special needs, are not deemed educable within mainstream provision. This fact is corroborated by *the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* and the UNESCO International Commission on Education for the 21st Century in its report, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, which note that early childhood

education is greatly underdeveloped in many countries and that the needs of young children with special needs are rarely met in formal education systems.

6. Amongst parents, there is a fairly unanimous view that education is a way out of poverty and social exclusion. Yet, education, especially with respect to the young child, should not be equated with schooling and instruction alone. Education means looking at the whole child and should include working through families and communities. It concerns the social and emotional growth of children, their health and nutrition, their outlook on life and their relationships with parents and other significant persons in their world. To a great extent, especially in the younger years, education is based on the home environment, play and the personal construction of meaning and roles.

7. Likewise, good health and nutrition, though crucial factors in the healthy development of children, are not sufficient by themselves. The educational and psychosocial development of children should also be of prime concern. Most people feel intuitively that a positive self-regard and a constructive attitude to the family and the community are important for children to have. To attain them, children need, amongst other things, caring mentors, consistency and challenges. When these needs are not fulfilled, children may fail to thrive, feel unhappy, and be unable to meet the expectations set by their family and society. Responding to children's emotions, aspirations and outlook on life are needed for children to function well as children and, later in life, as adults.

The Benefits of Early Childhood Development

8. It is not difficult to see that parents feel that early development encourages positive behaviour - at home, in school and in the community. Experience and research from many quarters support their intuition. It is widely accepted that investing in the psycho social development of children results in high rates of return, not only in social but also in economic terms. Several longitudinal studies show that children who have enjoyed high quality care and education do better and stay longer in school; suffer fewer accidents; require less curative medical attention; show more social responsibility as

adolescents; and are more likely to contribute to the stability of families and communities.

9. The notion of social cohesion is central to European social policy. There is growing recognition that early childhood programming can play an important role in reinforcing the integrative and cohesive forces in society. When based on family and community participation, such programming increases the likelihood of reaching families at risk and of providing them with further opportunities for education and social participation. Co-operation of the various agencies - health, social welfare and education - in reaching these families allows a more integral and effective approach.

Lessons from the Expert Meeting

10. Prior to the Conference, an international expert meeting of some twelve specialists in ECD took place. The results of the meeting may be summarised as follows. First, there is ample empirical evidence that early childhood programmes yield considerable positive effects. Children benefit from early childhood education, especially in the domain of language and cognitive development. Programmes are especially beneficial for children at risk. However, there is also evidence that results tend to fade away when such programmes are followed by poor quality primary and secondary education. Another important conclusion was that social-emotional aspects of development need more attention.

11. Second, the meeting agreed that research has identified a number of programme characteristics that contribute to success. Among them are attention to the relationship between teacher and child, and the inclusion of partnership with parents, leading to empowerment of parents. Furthermore, the timing and intensity of programmes are important, especially with regard to children and families at risk.

12. Third, an important aspect of early childhood education is curriculum, which creates a framework in which to organise programme activities with respect to both their format and content. They may include activities aiming to develop cognitive and social skills, e.g. play or activities in which children are easily engaged, guided by a teacher who is sensitive to the needs of the child. Curricula should be guided by the needs of the child and take contextual factors into account,

especially since families in western society experience many transitions, which may impact negatively on the development of children. Training is a key element in helping teacher to identify the needs of the individual child, to apply successfully a curriculum and to maintain good communication with parents. If this aspect is neglected, there is a considerable risk of dissonance between what is intended and actual practice.

13. The very fact that children are placed into groups creates an opportunity for them to experience positive social relations with peers and adults. An important aim of early childhood education is to create a safe and enriching environment, in which children from different backgrounds are happy and learn from each other. The meeting agreed that this is one of the primary means through which early childhood education may contribute to social integration.

Findings from the Workshops

14. During the Conference, three workshops were held, which allowed the participants to discuss a number of issues in more depth. The themes of the workshops were *accessibility, quality and large-scale implementation.* Background papers pertaining to these themes were available and provided general introductions.

Quality

15. It was generally agreed that quality is defined as a dynamic concept that varies over time and according to situation and person. It pertains to various interests - of the child, the parents, State and society B interests that should be accommodated and balanced. It is important to distinguish between quality of policy making and the quality of early development programming as such. For the latter, a number of approaches can be used. One can evaluate input against output or approach quality through a structural, environmental or process approaches.

16. Among the important components to be assessed are: the goals of the programme, design, frequency and duration, responsibilities of teachers and staff, environmental conditions and parental involvement. Policies at the local level should be based on analyses

of the local situation, trend analyses, formulated goals, clear progress criteria, monitoring and evaluation.

17. Overall quality control and assessment should be the responsibility of government, be it at different levels of government. At the national level, quality ECD could be promoted by providing financial support, providing training, stimulating innovative programmes and encouraging research into the development of young children. The discussion about quality should go beyond the immediate environment of the child and include policy making at local and national levels.

18. It was argued that progress in providing high-quality ECD on a sufficiently large scale is impeded by the following: lack of awareness by policy makers about the importance of early childhood development, conflicting ideas amongst professionals, the relatively low status of childcare providers, gaps in knowledge about the development of young children, especially of children with special needs and those growing up in families from a different cultural background.

19. With regard to common principles and standards, it was generally agreed that there are several principles that are common to every high-quality ECD programme or intervention, e.g. promoting the ability of learning to learn. However, it was not considered fruitful to engage in a discussion on basic or minimum quality requirements as such may depend on the specific situations of countries.

20. All agreed that the question of how concern for quality could be incorporated into the qualifications of persons working with the children is a crucial one. In particular, the quality of interaction and the ability to communicate with parents (and not just to talk with them) was highly estimated. This aspect has been confirmed by research findings showing that the variable teacher training correlates with educational quality.

21. Furthermore one should consider how much training and professionalism would really be necessary for the quality level that one wants to achieve. Governments investing in ECD programming and provision should therefore formulate a set of guidelines or quality charter and be specific about the important quality standards to be reached in different situations.

22. Further discussions on quality should take into account what has already been formulated at the European level, e.g. the reports of the European Commission Network on Childcare, which have identified forty quality aspects on nine dimensions.

Accessibility

23. The workshop on accessibility focussed on policies to enhance accessibility. There are many reasons why children, families and whole groups remain unreached, such as illegal status in a country or, as in the case of street children, extreme marginalisation. In addition, public insensitivity to need, in particular to special need, leads to poor access. Other reasons may be exclusion from the formal labour market, immigrant status and difficulties in expressing need.

24. In addition to adequate funding, successful policies are characterised by a clear, large-scale policy vision, enabling or bridging strategies and public support for the broad objectives of the policy vision. Governments should promote the empowerment of local populations through well-targeted, decentralised programmes. In turn, decentralisation must be accompanied by intensive capacity building, training and education at the local level - measures that can provide great opportunities for third-level education and its integration into local community affairs. Experience of decentralisation in many countries shows that without significant capacity building, local authorities are unable to organise the effective delivery of integrated services.

25. Several guidelines for implementing bridging policies toward local populations were proposed:

- That services should be demand not supply driven. Top-down approaches are often unwelcome and rarely work as satisfactorily as programmes in which there is some element of client ownership;
- That the relationships between central and local policies be guided by clear central policy, consultative policy-making at the local level and then by an input/output approach. These outputs or outcomes should be capable of measurement and be constantly monitored and evaluated;

- That in attempting to deliver local services, the trusted institutional mechanisms and the voluntary sector should work together. If necessary, those mechanisms could be reformed and renewed, e.g. by supporting pre- and post-natal services to be more sensitive to local need and co-ordinate effectively with local education services and voluntary bodies; by encouraging education authorities to take a wider view of early education and primary school, seeing them also as instruments of life-long, community or parental learning at the service of social integration and communities.

- That the family institution be used and developed. It was felt that in early development programming in particular, the involvement of fathers should be encouraged.

- That co-ordination between central ministries should be enhanced and common goals identified for local programmes;

- That bridging personnel from targeted groups should be trained to work with the institutional and voluntary professionals, e.g. parent paraprofessionals to work alongside child professionals in order both to sensitive the professionals to the unvoiced needs of local groups and to encourage those groups to approach and make use of professional services;

- That, as many social or educational policies are driven predominantly by the economic concerns of peoples and governments, greater efforts should be made by the human services sectors to connect with the world of economic policy, e.g. to present early childhood programming as not only good for children but also as a service to the labour market and, as it is highly preventive, as a means of reducing public expenditure in other fields. In this regard, partnerships with the business and economic sector should be envisaged for it is the interest of the whole society that all young children and their parents reach excellent developmental levels and avail of the educational opportunities which society has to offer.

Large-scale implementation

26. The workshop on large-scale implementation addressed a range of strategies to promote the growth and coverage of programmes and discussed the conditions under which a *universal* or a *contextual* approach could be most meaningful. In its totality, going-to-scale was seen as both a time-and resource-consuming process.

27. The discussion focussed on extending services within the informal sector to disadvantaged children and their families. The significant parameters that were seen as having a bearing on ECD were: the new requirements of the information age, the decentralisation/centralisation of resources and authority, the various definitions of ECD and relations between school-based and home-based approaches.

28. Large-scale parent education programmes are often rejected by families and voluntary bodies in the target population as they feel that parents will have to conform to imposed standards, may loose their identity or that their activities will be overly regulated and loose their dynamism. Group meetings and consultations of the target population were seen as a powerful way of minimising these negative perceptions.

29. Based on the experience of the Averroès Foundation in bringing to scale various intervention programmes for children and families in the Netherlands, the following critical elements were identified:

- The availability of a high-quality programme
- Access to expertise and experience. If this is not available in the implementing organisation, then it should be obtained elsewhere;
- The availability of financial resources. Often the generation of new funding is not required but rather, linking up with existing budgetary provision;
- The availability of governmental support;
- An organised and structured system of working;
- Contacts with local groups;
- Project personnel taken from the target group.

30. The maintenance of quality was seen as of central importance. It implies training, follow-up on training outcomes, the presence of a monitoring service, child/parent orientation, ongoing development of

materials, ongoing building up of materials, research, flexibility and clear vision

31. The success of implementing a large-scale programme is very much dependent on early and effective communication with all stakeholders, especially with the parents of the children. As some of these parents are very difficult to reach, communicating with them may pose serious problems. However, there is an abundance of success stories, showing that with sufficient sensitivity, flexibility and creativity, many difficult-to-reach and socially excluded groups can be engaged. In this context it was observed that many of the Averroès mothers had learned about the programme through their own informal networks rather than through targeted information.

32. With regard to training, ECD training centres were seen as an effective vehicle to bring programmes and services to scale. More reflection is needed as to whether these training centres should be national or international. The need for more information about ECD was also stressed. Policy makers would constitute a prime audience for such information, but stakeholders and groups, such as the private sector or the media should not be overlooked. In the ultimate analysis, however, it is the parents and children that should be served.

33. Working with local communities, responding to the needs of families and following a bottom-up approach are proven ways to sustain and expand a programme. These efforts should be backed up by a national policy and by sufficient nationally generated resources.

34. A particular issue of concern was that gains in early childhood coverage by the non-formal or voluntary sector are often countered by losses as well. New families come in, others opt out. Full coverage by one agency was therefore not easily attained. The trend in Europe is now to provide more options in services from which parents can choose.

35. Going-to-scale in the early childhood field should mean comprehensive programming that include aspects of health, welfare and education. It entails also determining the most efficient division of labour between the public and private sectors and between national and local levels.

36. The evaluation of large-scale programmes is usually carried out within national contexts. Comparative studies, using a wider European experience, could also be very useful.

Challenges for Participants and Policy Makers

37. The participants in the Conference carry major responsibilities for children and are profoundly committed to their well being. They feel a special sense of urgency where policy making is concerned, so as to deal with the societal changes and familial transitions which children confront today during their childhood and adolescence.

38. The Conference has shown that a promising way to face this challenge is by working together and by sharing experience. Individually and collectively, participants resolve to contribute to the efforts of governments to adopt an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to policy-making for children and families.

39. ECD programming is a major structural approach designed to meet the health, social and educational needs of children and families, and to enhance their social integration. It is implemented within a perspective both of education for lifelong learning and the requirements of the information age. Broader than the traditional pre-school model, it takes into account the continuous and holistic development of children, their wider learning and social needs, and includes outreach to families and communities.

40. Effective policies seek to support parents in their role as primary educators. These policies recognise the range of contexts in which children grow up, and accordingly, they offer many different models of intervention, home as well as centre-based. They recognise that effective early intervention can be delivered through both formal and non-formal means. Effective policies recognise too that a major increase in coverage should be balanced by efforts to keep services sensitive to the needs of specific groups and communities.

41. Attention is drawn to the necessary co-operation between the various ministries and local policy "stakeholders" so as to ensure propitious conditions for integrated services at the local community level. Monitoring and quality assessment should be established under the responsibility of the government.

42. The participants of the Conference researchers and policy makers from governments and non-governmental organisations, including the Averroès Foundation, as well as the representatives from the international agencies, including UNESCO, UNICEF, OECD, and the

Council of Europe acknowledge the importance of institutional capacity-building in early child development at national level. In particular, governmental support to agencies providing technical support or training to professionals of early childhood and family development would be highly appreciated;

43. The Conference underlines too the importance of agencies involved in research and the collection of accurate national data on early childhood and family interventions. Policy makers are invited to identify areas for research that will help them both to in refine and implement their policies. In this light, the importance of research relevant to the European context was stressed, including the merits of cross-border exchanges of experience and best practice;

44. The Conference wishes to express its gratitude to the Government of the Netherlands for organising this Conference and to the Government of Ireland for agreeing to organise a follow-up in the coming year. International co-organisation among policy makers is vital in the early childhood field, which, as this Conference has shown, is a key field for co-ordination between the educational, social and health sectors.

Annex 2

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The European Policy Conference on Early Childhood Education took place in Amsterdam, 23-24 April 1998. It was one of a series of recent initiatives taken by the Netherlands Government and UNESCO to address young child and family issues within the framework of education and social welfare policy.

The Conference focused on early childhood policy issues with special reference to the social integration of children and families at risk. It was organized to provide a judicious mix of policy statements, expert presentations, and group discussion. Participant discussion was arranged on both days of the Conference through a series of workshops organized around three themes: *quality, accessibility and going-to-scale.*

Highlights of the Conference were the quality of the position papers and keynote presentations, the well-focused policy discussion groups, the elaboration and adoption of a *Concluding statement* and a very stimulating exchange with over one hundred mothers of young children who participate in the child/parent *Step* programmes organized throughout the Netherlands by the Averroës Foundation.

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